Fact or Fad: Intermittent fasting for sustained weight loss

Clinical Question: Does intermittent fasting result in greater sustained (>6 month) weight loss than continuous dieting in adults?

Bottom Line: Although inconsistently defined, intermittent fasting (example 500 kcal/day for 2 days/week) and continuous dieting (~25% reduction in caloric intake daily) result in similar weight loss, usually ~5-9 kg at 6 months-1 year. Discontinuation rates with both diets is up to ~60%.

Evidence:

- “Fasting” generally refers to reducing caloric intake by ~75% of caloric needs/day; “continuous dieting” generally refers to reducing caloric intake by ~25%/day.
- Systematic review of 9 randomized, controlled trials (RCTs) at least 6 months in duration, 981 patients. Example regimen: fasting 2 days/week interspersed with 5 days/week regular intake. After 6 months-2 years:
  - No difference in mean weight loss.
  - Mean weight loss range in both groups: 2.1-26.6 kg.
- 6 RCTs published since above review, 24 to 332 patients, randomized to intermittent fasting (alternate day fasting, 2 days fasting with 5 non-fasting days/week, or weekly fasting) versus continuous dieting and/or no intervention control:
  - 5/6 RCTs: mean weight loss ranged ~5-9 kg in both arms, not statistically different.
  - Best quality RCT, 100 patients, randomized to alternate-day fasting, continuous dieting, or no intervention control for 6 months. After additional 6-month follow-up:
    - Weight loss between fasting and continuous dieting: no difference.
      - Both diets lost ~6% more than no intervention.
  - 1 RCT, 51 men, both groups decreased calories by 33%. Intermittent fasting (alternating 2-week blocks of fasting with regular diet) or continuous diet for 16 weeks. After 6-month follow-up:
    - Statistically significant difference in weight loss: 11 kg versus 3 kg (continuous).
Only patients who completed the study were included in the analysis.

Context:
- Discontinuation rates 30-60%.\(^1,3,4\)
- Weight loss for most diets peaks ~ 6 months,\(^1\) then slow regain,\(^3,6,7\)
- No weight loss diet appears superior to another across populations, however individual results vary widely.\(^8\)
- Mediterranean diet is the only diet that reduces cardiovascular disease.\(^9\)

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References:

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