



## FASTING

“Fasting of the body is food for the soul.” -Saint John Chrysostom  
“I fast for greater physical and mental efficiency.” -Plato  
“The best of all medicines is resting and fasting.” -Benjamin Franklin

It has been exciting to see the growing interest and acceptance of fasting for health benefits. Fasting is one of the longstanding and effective levers that I have used to be lean and vibrant.

Popular and effective programs include:

- [intermittent fasting](#)
- [5/2 Diet](#)
- [Fasting Mimicking Diet by PROLON](#)
- [Alternate-day fasting](#)
- [Caloric restriction](#) has also demonstrated health benefits and I would include this under the fasting category as well.
- [The Warrior Diet](#) is also worthy of attention.
  - SEE ALSO: [The Warrior Diet: Switch on Your Biological Powerhouse For High Energy, Explosive Strength, and a Leaner, Harder Body](#). This talented and unique author first demonstrated the potential benefits of undereating or intermittent fasting over 20 years ago by shining light on how Ancient Greek and Roman warriors managed their days on campaign spotlighting how they balanced periods of stress with a symposium-like meal to end the day.

The frequency and personal adaptation of fasting need to be individualized and it remains unclear if both men and women respond equally well to all of the different programs. However, fasting has been shown to improve cellular health through a process called autophagy, improve body composition and appetite regulation, and has shown promising research benefits for the immune, brain, and cardiac systems. Here are some great fasting links that go into more detail.

- [Benefits Of Fasting \(Plus The Top 5 Questions I Get Asked About Fasting\).](#)
- [The Latest Research On Fasting: What 9 Brand New Studies Have To Say](#)

## ANCIENT GREECE

The world of Ancient Greece and its virtuous pagans have a long and robust history of fasting. As noted scholar Heather Reid has stated, “The notion of a harmonious development of spiritual and bodily nature has been first conceived and actualized by the Greeks.” This was initially tied to the worship of Orpheus and those who adopted the world-denying aspects of Orphism which

declared a separation between world and spirit. Ritual fasting was also part of the Eleusian mysteries that honored the goddess of fertility Demeter. Pythagoras and Plato espoused the benefits of the fast in a deeper meaning as they emphasized both its physical and metaphysical benefits. Pythagoras systematically fasted for 40 days believing it increased his mental perception and creativity and emphasized vegetarian diets for his followers as a way to further incorporate the fast. Plato divided medicine into “true” and “false”; the “true” being that which gives health, including fasting, air, and sun. Fasting was also used by ancient athletes as it was meant to prepare their bodies for physical training ahead of the Olympic Games.

Dora Kitinas Gogos in an article for Neo Kosmos writes:

*But it was Hippocrates (460-357BC), the father of modern medicine, who created the Mediterranean diet and who took fasting and food out of the realm of philosophy and made them into a medical must. He said the following about fasting for a sick person – this is only a small extract: “The addition of food should be much rarer, since it is often useful to completely take it away while the patient can withstand it, until the force of the disease reaches its maturity. If the body is cleared the more you feed it the more it will be harmed. When a patient is fed too richly, the disease is fed as well ... excess is against nature.”*

## RELIGION AND FASTING

Fasting has always held a deeper meaning for traditional pious cultures-primarily in the monotheistic faiths but also in the Eastern Asian religions such as Buddhism. Native American tribes also considered fasting an essential part of their vision quests. Traditional cultures have always appreciated the ascetic disciplines and valued those in their communities who regularly partook in such practices.

According to Yamina Mermer a professor in Islamic Studies:

*When we talk about fasting in Islam what comes to mind is the month of Ramadan. At the end of this month of fasting comes the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast. This is the first of the two main feasts of Islam. The second is the Feast of Sacrifice, and it is celebrated about two months after the end of Ramadan. Why does the month of fasting culminate in feasting? First let us remember that fasting is one of the pillars of Islam (“Islam” literally means surrendering to the will of God and making peace, or salam); it is said that fasting brings about spiritual fulfillment and that in the month of fasting, goods are multiplied many times. For Muslims, it is a month of blessings.*

Rabbi Arnold Bienstock states:

*The ritual drama of the Day of Atonement captures the transformative power of communal fasting. The atmosphere is that of contrition and introspection. As Yom Kippur is a twenty-four-hour fast, with total abstinence from food and drink, the traditional worshippers spend the entire day in prayer. The confession of sins is chanted communally, emphasizing Judaism’s belief in the centrality of the spiritual community. The fast is a spiritual cleansing, both on an individual and communal level. Rabbinic*

*Judaism applies the concept of ritual purity from Leviticus to the idea of spiritual and moral purity. Yom Kippur, with its rituals of denial, cleanses the soul.*

Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D. and Director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery explains his take from a Buddhist perspective:

*Fasting in the monastic community is considered an ascetic practice, a "dhutanga" practice. (Dhutanga means "to shake up" or "invigoration.") Dhutangas are a specific list of thirteen practices, four of which pertain to food: eating once a day, eating at one sitting, reducing the amount you eat; on alms-round, eating only the food that you receive at the first seven houses. These practices are adopted by individuals voluntarily, they are not required in the normal course of a Buddhist monastic's life of practice. The Buddha, as is well known, emphasized moderation, the Middle Way that avoids extremes, in all things. Fasting is an additional method that one can take up, with supervision, for a time.*

## CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Christian community, in particular those denominations linked to the historical beginning of the church (Eastern Orthodox and Catholicism), have a robust and long tradition of fasting which has unfortunately become much more scattered and inconsistent in modern times.

Professor David Deavel, editor of Logos and director of the Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law, and Public Policy, states:

*The lack of any serious communal ascetical practices during Lent and throughout the year is one of the defining weaknesses of modern Christians. We do so little because so little is asked of us. What the Catholic Church and various Protestants need is a return to real fasting that is accompanied by both serious almsgiving and serious attention to prayer. We Catholics and Protestant Christians need to return to the notion of a Great Lent that the Eastern Churches still have.*

I often paraphrase my friend Anglican Bishop Julian Dobbs, a true man "Man For All Seasons" who practices the mind-body disciplines of fasting and running marathons, in saying that those of Northern European backgrounds forget that Jesus Christ was born and raised in a Near Eastern culture that embraced important spiritual practices such as fasting.

## GREEK ORTHODOX APPROACH- ADVANCED MEDITERRANEAN DIET

As a practicing Christian of the Eastern Orthodox denomination, I can attest to the centrality and common practice of fasting. In particular, most of us who are Greek have been raised in an environment where fasting is ubiquitous and the aesthetic or spiritual disciplines regularly emphasized.

Father Anastasios Gounaris states:

*Fasting is part of a group of spiritual disciplines that, in the original Greek, all come under the heading of askesis (pronounced AHSS-key-cese). These spiritual disciplines also include prayer, mortification of the passions, practicing humility, almsgiving, controlling the tongue, and others that most think of as being observed in their purest*

*form only by monastics. To give you some idea of the meaning of this word, Modern Greek commonly uses the word askesis to denote exercise of the physical type (the kind you do in a gym). This is why it's not at all strange that we refer to monks and nuns as the spiritual "athletes" of the Church, because they are always training, engaging in this askesis on a "professional" level. If monastics are the spiritual athletes of Orthodoxy, then most non-monastics could rightly be considered as the weekend athletes of the spiritual world.*

Greek Orthodox Christians often follow traditional fasting rituals which emphasize vegetarian/vegan diets over approximately 180 to 200 days of the year based on the church calendar. Dr. Ancel Keys, who led the original research on the benefits of the healthy Mediterranean Diet, considered the island of Crete the epitome of such healthy eating. However, there was a critical factor he completely overlooked or dismissed; the majority of the population followed the Greek Orthodox tradition of fasting.

I believe these fasting practices are a central component to the impressive health benefits found in the original research of the Mediterranean Diet which was undertaken on the island of Crete during post-World War II Greece. These authors make the same claim:

#### **[Greek Orthodox fasting rituals: a hidden characteristic of the Mediterranean diet of Crete](#)**

*The Seven Countries Study population of Crete came from rural areas of Crete where religious strictures and rituals were deeply embedded in the traditions, customs and lifestyle including dietary habits. Although the Seven Countries Study attributed the excellent health status of the population and the low CHD morbidity and mortality to dietary habits (Menotti et al. 1999), there is no investigation of the impact of Greek Orthodox fasting recommendations on dietary intake.*

*The low incomes common to the Crete population in the early 1960s do not totally explain the low meat and dairy-product intake since the majority of the population were small-hold farmers producing their own animal and plant products. During the Greek Orthodox Church fasting periods, animal products are preserved for the non-fasting periods. Apart from the health-promoting effects, these practices had positive benefits in terms of economic and environmental sustainability.*

*The Orthodox Church specifies dietary restrictions and a fasting for a total of 180–200 d annually. The faithful are advised to avoid olive oil, meat, fish, milk, eggs and cheese every Wednesday and Friday, with the exception of the week after Christmas, Easter and the Pentecost. There are three principal fasting periods annually.*

(Avid readers may remember this same text as shared [in my most recent newsletter from March 5, 2021](#))

#### **THE MOUNT ATHOS DIET**

An underappreciated but perhaps easier Mediterranean Diet approach is called [The Mount Athos Diet](#).

*Perched atop a rugged coastline on a small Greek island sits one of the world's healthiest communities - the Mount Athos monks.*

*They have followed the same routine inside the monasteries that scatter the island for thousands of years. And, as the authors of [The Mount Athos Diet: The Mediterranean Plan to Lose Weight, Feel Younger and Live Longer](#) explain 'the monks live very long lives, largely free of cancers, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's... Their way of eating also carries with it an enticing by-product: natural weight loss'. They also live an average of 10 years longer than the average Greek! So perhaps it's no surprise that the wider world now wants to know their secret.*

*The authors behind the Mount Athos Diet are quick to point out that this routine is 'a way of life' for the monks, which forms part of their religious observance.*

*'All the food eaten within the monasteries is fresh, organic and seasonal', the authors say. 'No ready-meals or processed foods ever enter a monastery. Their pattern of eating remains constant: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are regarded as Fast Days when the diet is essentially vegan - no dairy or animal protein, no wine or olive oil. Fast Day cooking is done with water, rather than oil. The remainder of the week is given over to Moderation Days (unless there is a feast day looming) when the daily menu expands to include fish, cheese, eggs, yoghurt and red wine. 'Feast Days are joyous occasions, when home-caught fish dominates the menu, cakes, sweets and even ice-cream may be served. These are seen by the monks as 'treats', but even so - always consumed in moderation.'*

The feast day is usually weekly, often on Sunday, the diet on this day is expanded and often includes some meat in addition to fish.

#### FASTING AS A GATEWAY TO A DEEPER APPROACH

Traditional cultures, especially the monotheistic faiths, have always linked fasting with the practices of prayer and almsgiving (giving to the poor or needy). The Ancient Church Fathers of the Orthodox and Catholic denominations stressed an integral approach that emphasized an outward and inward virtue and behavior of which fasting was important but not enough. It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander, "You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother."

Bishop Kallistos Ware, an Englishman who has become a very influential Greek Orthodox bishop writes:

*But what is meant by this word 'fast' (Greek-nisteia)? Here the utmost care is needed, so as to preserve a proper balance between the outward and the inward. On the outward level fasting involves physical abstinence from food and drink, and without such exterior abstinence a full and true fast cannot be kept; yet the rules about eating and drinking must never be treated as an end in themselves, for ascetic fasting has always an inward and unseen purpose. Man is a unity of body and soul, a living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible', in the words of the Triodion; and our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once.*

*The tendency to over-emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way, and the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary, are both alike to*

*be deplored as a betrayal of true Orthodoxy. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.*

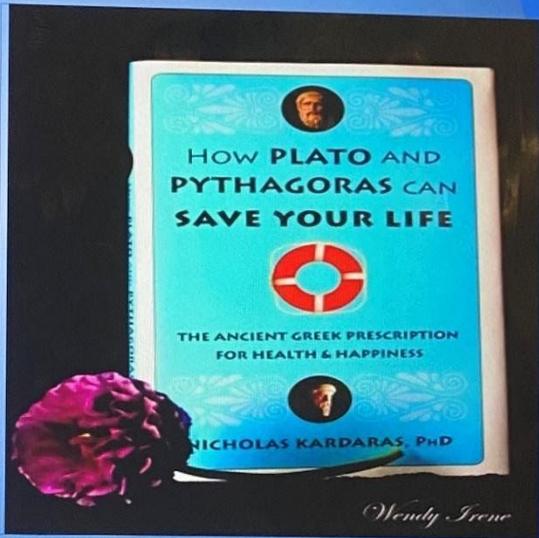
*As a result, many contemporary Christians have lost a true vision of man as an integral unity of the visible and the invisible; they neglect the positive role played by the body in the spiritual life, forgetting St. Paul's affirmation: 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. . . . glorify God with your body' (I Cor. 6: 19-20).*

In summary, fasting has significant benefits for the Physics (Greek word for the body) and Metaphysics of health and resiliency. There are many easy approaches that anyone can safely undertake whether it is by eliminating certain foods, caloric restriction, or emphasizing the timing of meals. Since it can be argued that our modern culture, like our food and air, is toxic, fasting from overuse of technology and social media and practicing more periods of silence, simplicity and solitude would be an even more helpful way to expand our ascetic disciplines and optimize and recharge our health and declutter our overburdened mind and spirit. Such an integrated approach that was once shared by many cultures but since has lost its footing is an excellent recipe for a fractured society that has further suffered from the ramifications of the pandemic.

Here is a slide I often refer to in my talks about an integrated view of health and one which I reflect on often that succinctly summarizes these points:

## The Greek Miracle-Ancient Path to Wellness

- Healthy mind, body, and spirit were nurtured (tuned) via:
  - strict diet
  - rigorous physical exercise
  - daily meditational walks
  - lessons on ethics and character-Plutarchian Virtues
  - contemplation on math, music, philosophy, cosmology, and religion



*Wendy Irene*

Yours in health-  
Sam Pappas, MD