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for **FASTING**

ANGELA DOWDEN

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Angela Dowden is a registered nutritionist who writes on diet and health for numerous newspapers and magazines. She was awarded the Nutrition and Health Writer/Broadcaster of the Year award in 2012.

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Both metric and imperial measurements are given for the recipes. Use one set of measures only, not a mixture of both.

Standard level spoon measurements are used in all recipes

1 tablespoon = 15 ml

1 teaspoon = 5 ml

Ovens should be preheated to the specified temperature. If using a fan-assisted oven, follow the manufacturer's instructions for adjusting the time and temperature. Grills should also be preheated.

This book includes dishes made with nuts and nut derivatives. It is advisable for those with known allergic reactions to nuts and nut derivatives and those who may be potentially vulnerable to these allergies, such as pregnant and nursing mothers, invalids, the elderly, babies and children, to avoid dishes made with nuts and nut oils.

The Department of Health advises that eggs should not be consumed raw. This book contains some dishes made with raw or lightly cooked eggs. It is prudent for more vulnerable people such as pregnant and nursing mothers, invalids, the elderly, babies and young children to avoid uncooked or

lightly cooked dishes made with eggs.

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The 5:2 diet

Introduction

If you've picked up this book you may already be a convert to intermittent fasting. Alternatively, you may have heard about its benefits and are wondering whether to give it a go. At the other end of the scale you may be a battle-weary diet sceptic, still holding out a small hope you'll one day find the way to shape up and feel healthier permanently. Whatever your starting point or motivation, if you have a small or large amount of weight to lose and would like to feel more comfortable in your own skin, it's for you too.

So what is the 5:2 approach to weight loss and how does it work? There are any number of ways people practise intermittent fasting, from one day of light eating a week to no food at all for several days in a row. The 5:2 approach works well for most people because it's a pragmatic solution that steers a safe, doable and yet effective path through these extremes.

How to use the book

The 5:2 plan allows normal eating (including treats and meals out) for five days a week and then restricts calorie intake to 500 calories a day for women and 600 calories for men (a quarter of the normal recommended daily intake) for the other two. For most people, it's the perfect compromise that allows for socializing, family life and work commitments, while still introducing enough calorie control to make sure you lose weight at a healthy rate.

With its delicious and innovative recipe selection, this book shows just how flexibly you can consume your 500 or 600 calories to keep the hunger wolf from the door and, yes, even tickle your taste buds at the same time! It also includes some sweet treats, but they are perfectly suitable for a fast day as they're not too high in sugar.

Ultimately, you'll be losing weight – as can only ever be the case – by eating, overall, fewer calories than your body uses up. But where the 5:2 diet is particularly brilliant is how marvellously achievable it can make this task for food lovers. People who find success with 5:2 often report that they failed to lose weight in the past because cutting back every day was such a struggle – doing so for just a couple of days a week, albeit more drastically, is a much more attractive proposition.

Better still, far from being a short-term fad, those who practise intermittent fasting find it is a lifestyle choice that they can stick to because it doesn't take over their whole life, doesn't demonize specific foods and can even run alongside other supportive weight-loss regimens, such as online food diary methods.

As to the health benefits? As you lose body fat and get trimmer, you can expect to greatly reduce your chance of having a heart attack or developing heart disease.

And, in strands of research unrelated to the weight-loss benefits, there's a growing groundswell of science that shows that periodically putting your body into a fasted state may cause various chemical changes linked with lower risk of age-related diseases and higher chance of living healthier for longer.

Whether you're a 5:2 fan in search of food inspiration, or just intrigued to know more, you'll find something in this book for you. Read, digest, get slimmer and enjoy!

IS THE 5:2 DIET FOR EVERYONE?

Most overweight adults can benefit from a 5:2 diet, but it should never be embarked on by children or adolescents, for whom any form of nutritional stress is undesirable. Also, do not do the 5:2 diet if any of the following apply (check with your medical practitioner if you are uncertain).

- **You are pregnant, trying to get pregnant or breastfeeding.**
- **You are already at the bottom end of your healthy weight. You can check this using an online Body Mass Index (BMI) calculator (see [How can I check my BMI](#)) – a BMI of 20 or less would indicate you are not a candidate for 5:2, or indeed any weight-loss programme.**
- **You are an elite athlete or in training for a marathon or other big stamina event (although normal levels of activity can be undertaken on the 5:2 diet – [Exercise and 5:2](#)).**
- **You are diabetic.**
- **You have irritable bowel syndrome**
- **You have been diagnosed with an eating disorder, either recently or in the past.**

How does intermittent fasting work?

People have fasted – out of choice or through necessity – for millennia, so the general concept is far from new. Interest was roused in the 1930s (and repeatedly since) when scientists found that restricting the calories fed to various animals and insects increased their lifespan. The idea of severely restricting calories every other day – rather than by a smaller amount every day – came later, in 2003 with laboratory research carried out at the National Institute on Aging (NIA) in America. The concept of intermittent fasting – and more specifically the 5:2 diet – for managing weight reached a mass audience when Dr Michael Mosley presented the theories in a BBC *Horizon* programme aired in August 2012.

The IGF-1 advantage

Most people are more than happy with the tangible benefits – a flatter stomach and streamlined thighs – that intermittent fasting can bring. But experts are interested in what it may do to our internal chemistry, in particular a hormone called IGF-1, or insulin-like growth factor. IGF-1 is important for growth when we are young but, in adulthood, lower IGF-1 levels are better, as they are linked with a less rapid turnover of cells and, potentially, a decreased cancer risk.

What's been discovered is that fasting can lower levels of IGF-1 and that a modest protein diet (as opposed to a typically meat-packed western one) can have this effect too. IGF-1 levels don't stay depressed for long when you return to normal eating, so the repeated on/off pattern of intermittent fasting might help keep levels persistently lower and healthier. It's a fascinating area of research with lots still to be discovered!

Fasting is nothing new!

Fasting for physical wellbeing and spiritual reflection is as old as the hills and all of the big religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, embrace it. It's only in modern times that we've become obsessed by the notion that we'll grow weak and depleted if we don't graze on food around the clock. In fact, you don't have to think too long about it to realize that a menu of regularly spaced meals and snacks is probably more alien to our body than periods of feast followed by periods of famine. For cavemen and women, there would undoubtedly have been periods when they were subsisting only on berries, roots and leaves until the next animal kill, when they were able to stock up on concentrated calories ready for further lean times ahead.

Nowadays, despite being bombarded with never-ending eating opportunities, our bodies are still

designed with a biology and hormones that expect food to be scarce at some times and more plentiful at others. This is why many scientists believe intermittent fasting could be a particularly healthy and physiologically appropriate way to keep trim and fight ageing.

As well as suiting our biology, intermittent fasting also works well on a psychological level. The ‘carrot’ of being able to eat without depriving yourself for five days a week far outweighs the ‘stick’ of two much tougher days each week.

Addressing 5:2 diet concerns

Any ‘new’ eating regimen is likely to attract critical attention, and intermittent fasting is no exception, especially given there are any number of versions with various levels of sensibleness and safety.

Suffice to say, as a registered nutritionist, I had to be completely confident that the particular version of 5:2 fasting described in these pages can do no harm. And, for the record, I am completely confident that this is so. However, to deal with some specific points that might worry you, read on.

HAVEN’T STUDIES SHOWN THAT PEOPLE FIND INTERMITTENT FASTING HARDER THAN NORMAL CALORIE COUNTING?

This worried me, too, when I read a 2011 paper by Dr Michelle Harvie and the team at Genesis Breast Cancer Prevention, a charity in Manchester. It compared obese women following a 5:2-style programme with obese women on modest calorie restriction every day, and found fewer of those in the intermittent fasting group reported that they would continue with the regimen. Dr Harvie has since modified and improved the diet, however, and in a further, more recent clinical trial, her subjects were significantly more likely to stick to the fasting regimen than normal calorie restriction. I guess this usefully illustrates the importance of finding a version of 5:2 eating that you can actually *enjoy*. Let’s not pretend that any one regimen is always going to work for everyone, though – if something doesn’t work for you, don’t do it!

FASTING MAY BE OKAY FOR MEN, BUT ISN’T IT BAD FOR WOMEN?

The basis of this argument seems to be that women have lower lean tissue levels and as such have less reserve if skipped meals lead to the breakdown of essential muscle. Even if this were a concern – and studies of moderate intermittent fasting regimes suggest it’s not – this is covered by eating modest amounts of protein on your fast day (see [Fast Day Eating](#) guidelines). Another small study that compared the experiences of eight non-obese men and women might also seem a blow to females, as concluded that intermittent fasting seemed to ‘adversely affect glucose tolerance in non-obese women’.

but not in non-obese men'. However, the subjects were on a harsh regimen with no food at all for 36 hours in every 48-hour period. Obese women following much gentler routines, like the one advocated in this book, show very good responses in blood glucose levels and markers of diabetes risk (see [Diabetes and Blood Sugar Control](#)).

I HEARD IT COULD AFFECT FERTILITY?

As long as you eat your 500 calories on fast days you're not being too extreme and there is no evidence whatsoever that female fertility will be affected. Being very overweight is much more likely to affect your fertility, and 5:2 is an effective way to tackle being overweight. However, to be on the safe side, don't follow a 5:2 diet if you are actively trying for a baby. Being very thin will also affect fertility.

DOESN'T 'FASTING' ENCOURAGE EATING DISORDERS?

We're very clear that you shouldn't try intermittent fasting if you have ever had an eating disorder. This is just to be safe in case it unearths any old obsessive behaviours. More lengthy forms of fasting may be somewhat addictive but 5:2 isn't a food-free fast at all, it's just a restricted-calorie one. There is no evidence at all that it can trigger a new eating disorder.

ISN'T SKIPPING MEALS BAD FOR YOU?

If skipping meals is part of a generally erratic and unhealthy pattern of eating, where you lurch from one unhealthy snack to another in lieu of proper balanced meals, then yes. However, with the type of controlled food restriction advocated by 5:2, the focus is on getting good nutrition despite having very few calories. There's now also lots of evidence showing that, far from being bad for you, periods with no or very little food intake are actually healthy, provided, as outlined in [Is the 5:2 Diet for Everyone](#) and above, you don't have a medical or psychological condition that prohibits it.

HOW ABOUT BREAKFAST?

Skipping this meal is particularly frowned upon by experts, but most intermittent fasters will eat it on a fast day. However, don't force yourself to do so if you prefer not to: although breakfast eating is clearly associated with better health and weight, breakfast eaters also tend to have many other healthy habits, such as watching saturated fat intake and doing more exercise, which collectively explain the benefits.

ARE 5:2 REGIMENS STRICT ENOUGH TO GET MAXIMAL HEALTH BENEFITS?

One criticism, usually from academic quarters, is that 5:2 fasting doesn't actually deliver as many

health benefits as it could and that periods of 18–36 hours without food are needed for potential protection against conditions like Alzheimer’s and cancer. This is at odds with what’s conventionally thought safe and sensible, so is there a sensible compromise? If you want to potentially maximize the benefits of 5:2, one way *may* be to try eating just one meal on your fast day, and to make it lunch or dinner (you could try a combination of dishes from our recipe section). However, fasting in any prolonged fashion is beyond the remit of this book, and the focus of our 5:2 advice is safe and efficient weight loss, so never do anything that feels uncomfortable.

CAN IT AFFECT SLEEP AND STRESS LEVELS?

There have been some reports that fasting can lead to people sleeping more fitfully or feeling more anxious, which may be linked with changes in blood sugar level. However, such side effects are much more likely to occur with intense fasting programmes than they are with the more moderate 5:2 regimen. To minimize the potential for such effects, spread out your food on a fast day and choose carbohydrates with lower GIs (see [Choose Quality Carbs](#)).

WILL I NEED VITAMIN SUPPLEMENTS?

5:2 does not advocate the cutting out of any foods or food groups, and so is less likely to leave you short of nutrients than more faddy regimens. If you use 5:2 as an opportunity to overhaul your eating habits for the good, there should be even less reason to need supplements. However, some people, women in particular, can find that nutrient intakes become borderline when they cut calories. If you do choose to take a supplement make it a basic A–Z style one.

The health benefits of intermittent fasting

As with any emerging new science, intermittent fasting attracts a variety of expert opinion and debate from ‘evidence that intermittent fasting can have health benefits is very strong’ (Professor Mark Mattson, Chief of the Laboratory of Neurosciences at the US National Institute on Aging) to ‘limited evidence base for intermittent fasting in general’ (our very own NHS).

What’s undeniable is that the research into the health benefits of intermittent fasting is really picking up and, although to date the number of human studies may have been rather small, this is rapidly changing, with new results coming out all the time.

In fact, so much so that it’s hard to keep up unless you’re immersed on a daily basis in this academic area – which is probably why www.nhs.uk scattered its review of 5:2 dieting with caveats warning readers it was an ‘unsystematic review’ and ‘not an exhaustive “last word” on the topic’. Suffice to say, the top researchers in the area of intermittent fasting – most of them at American universities – tend to get a lot more excited and evangelical than serious academics normally have a wont to do when it comes to their particular areas of research. Many practise intermittent fasting themselves – and often hardcore versions – because they are so convinced of the benefits.

So what do we know are the benefits of intermittent fasting so far?

Weight loss

When you only eat 500 or 600 calories for two days a week and don’t significantly overcompensate during the remaining five days (as evidence shows most people don’t), it stands to reason that weight will start to fall off. But research suggests that intermittent fasting may help people remove excess weight in a more efficient and effective way than normal calorie restriction.

In particular, a 2011 review by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago found that people who did [alternate day fasting](#) (a repeating pattern of one day unrestricted eating followed by one day of no- or low-calorie fasting) were more likely to retain higher amounts of muscle tissue while losing at least as much fat. This is important because muscle helps to keep your metabolic rate higher, in essence because it is much more metabolically active than other tissues. In short, by having a more muscular frame you can continue to burn more calories all day every day, even when you are resting, which is very helpful in managing your weight over the longer term.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger

Research published in the *Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry* showed that feeding rats and mice only every other day improved the health and function of their brains, hearts and other organs. Other studies have shown that mice and rats on intermittent fasts develop fewer cancers, are less prone to neurological disorders and live 30 per cent longer than their siblings that were fed every day. All this is fascinating stuff that's driving the new wave of human studies, but what's particularly interesting is that experts think it's the *stress* that fasting puts on the body that does the good!

According to Professor Mark Mattson – the world's most cited neuroscientist as reported in *New Scientist* magazine – fasting is a type of hormesis, a process whereby organisms exposed to low levels of stress or toxins become more resistant to tougher challenges. For example, the mild biological stress induced by fasting causes cells in the heart and gut to produce proteins that decrease heart rate and blood pressure and increase gut motility (the movement of food through the gut), reducing the risk of heart disease, stroke and colon cancer. It really does seem to be a case of what doesn't kill you (i.e. managing on minimum food for a couple of days a week) makes you stronger!

Diabetes and blood sugar control

Any amount of weight loss in obese individuals, however it is achieved, will generally result in the body becoming more sensitive to insulin, which is an important step towards reducing the risk of diabetes (exercise has the effect of making you more responsive to insulin, too). But intermittent fasting could have a particularly good effect on your blood sugar control and diabetes risk.

In one of Dr Michelle Harvie's studies for Genesis Breast Cancer Prevention at Manchester's Wytheshawe Hospital, women who were on a 5:2-style intermittent fasting diet (largely milk and vegetables, adding up to 650 calories for two days each week, and a Mediterranean-style diet for the rest of the time), were compared with women who were restricted to 1,500 calories every day. In both groups women lost weight, reduced their cholesterol levels, recorded lower blood pressures and had reduced markers of breast cancer risk. When it came to reductions in fasting insulin and insulin resistance – both signs that diabetes risk has decreased – the benefits, though modest, were greater in the 5:2 diet group than those using conventional calorie restriction.

Heart disease

As I have alluded to, a reduction in cardiovascular risk factors – for example, LDL cholesterol (that's the 'bad' type that carries cholesterol towards arteries, where it collects and causes 'furring') and high blood pressure – can be expected on the 5:2 diet. Triglycerides in the blood will also tend to fall as

you lose weight (put simply, this means that your blood is less sticky and therefore less liable to clot).

Much of the work in this area has been done by Dr Krista Varady and her team at the University of Illinois at Chicago, with one of her scientific papers on the subject being entitled ‘Intermittent fasting combined with calorie restriction is effective for weight loss and cardio-protection in obese women’ (November 2012). The research outlines the benefit that intermittent fasting, and wider, healthy weight loss, can contribute to a healthy heart. It’s all very much in the title really!

Brain function

Much of the research into intermittent fasting actually started, and continues, in the healthy ageing field, and brain ageing in particular. At the National Institute on Aging in America they’ve been investigating rats and mice that have been genetically engineered to develop Alzheimer’s disease. Given normal circumstances, these animals show obvious signs of dementia by the time they are a year old (getting disorientated in a maze that they have previously been able to navigate with ease, for example), but when they’re put on an on/off fasting regimen they don’t develop dementia until they’re around 20 months, or much nearer the natural end of their lives.

What could be the reason? One thing that’s been reported is that the fasting mouse brain produces more of a protein called BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), which stimulates the growth of new nerve cells in the hippocampus part of the brain, essential for learning and memory. There’s certainly an evolutionary logic for the fasting state to be linked with better cognitive function, too: if you were hungry in caveman days, you needed your wits about you to track down the next meal and survive!

As yet there are still many unknowns (for example, whether longer periods of fasting are needed than normally experienced on a 5:2 diet) and the human studies have still to be done, so it’s impossible to say if intermittent fasting will help to prevent dementia. But it’s certainly a very interesting area of research, and one to watch.

Cancer

Much of the published research into the potential disease-protective effects of intermittent fasting involve measuring a biological marker named insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1), which is known to be associated with cancer. Fasting has the effect of reducing IGF-1 levels, at least temporarily, and also seems to stimulate genes that repair our cells.

How a reduction in IGF-1 translates into successful real-world outcomes (i.e., a reduced chance of

people getting cancer) is still unclear, however. One 2007 clinical review did look at ‘real-world’ health outcomes and concluded that intermittent fasting (specifically, alternate day fasting, which usually has minimum 18-hour periods without food) may have a protective effect against cancer, as well as heart disease and diabetes. However, it concluded ‘research is required to establish definitive the consequences’, which is a fair reflection of the science as it currently is. In short, how effective intermittent fasting is against cancer relative to other healthy-eating or weight-loss regimens is still to be clarified.

COULD 5:2 MAKE YOU HAPPIER?

Anecdotally, many 5:2 eaters say their low-calorie intake makes them feel more clear-headed, more able to concentrate and even more cheerful. It’s uncertain as to why this should be, but feeling more upbeat will certainly make it easier to refuse that slice of cake!

THE GENDER DIVIDE

On a fasting day:

- **If you’re a man, you should have no more than 600 calories.**
- **If you’re a woman, you should have no more than 500 calories.**
- **It is a fact that, even if a man and a woman weigh the same, the man will usually have a higher metabolism than the woman because he has a higher proportion of muscle (see [Fasting May Be Ok For Men But Isn’t It Bad For Women?](#)).**

Getting started

The beauty of the 5:2 diet is that, beyond the requirement for two 500- or 600-calorie days a week, there are no firm rules and it's very flexible. As with all new healthy habits, however, it can take time to adjust and the hunger aspect can initially be hard. On the plus side, the results you begin to see and feel within short order mean your fast days will quickly become less of a chore, and even something you can begin to enjoy. Preparation and planning are key.

Choose your fasting days

As a first step, you'll need to decide which days will work best for you as fasting days. This may evolve over time, or from week to week, according to your circumstances. As a general rule, you're more likely to stick to the regimen if you can repeat the same two days every week, so try to choose days that you'll need to deviate from only infrequently. For example, don't pick a Tuesday if this is the day when a friend is most likely to invite you round for lunch, or a Friday if you're going to be tempted by a takeaway after work. For obvious reasons, weekend days may not be such good fasting days either, but everyone's different and you should choose what works for you.

Whether you run the two days consecutively or apart is also up to you, and there isn't enough research to say definitively that one way or another is best. Most people doing 5:2 for themselves, rather than in the context of a highly monitored clinical trial, simply find it easiest in terms of managing hunger and keeping on track to have a gap between fasting days. However, if two days together suits you better, and you feel energetic and motivated, there's no reason why you shouldn't do it this way.

Fast day meals

The second decision to make is how you will spread your 500 or 600 calories over the fasting day. Again, this is down to personal preference, usually honed through trial and error. A satisfying format for many people is to bookend their day with two meals – a 100–200-calorie breakfast and a 300-calorie dinner for example, with the possibility of 100 calories or so for snacking or another small meal in between if desired. Other people report they are happier if they don't eat their first morsel until brunch or lunch, while still others (usually men, on anecdotal evidence) prefer saving up their calories for just one reasonable-sized meal – either a lunch or an evening meal.

One argument for leaving your first calorie intake until lunch or later is that the stretch of time you go without food is longer – perhaps 18 hours or more – which some researchers have surmised may be associated with potentially bigger health benefits (see [How About Breakfast](#)). (By comparison, the

longest you'd go without food if you eat breakfast on your fasting day is likely to be around 12 hours

However, many people, perhaps women in particular, prefer to graze their way through fast days, and Dr Michelle Harvie's research offers some reassurance here. It found that obese women eating three small, evenly-spaced mini meals on two non-consecutive fasting days per week lost weight efficiently and also reduced inflammatory chemicals that increase breast cancer risk.

The main point is to find what suits you and not to shoehorn yourself into a routine that doesn't fit your lifestyle. We simply don't know the optimum food-free stretch, if there is any optimum at all.

To find a pattern of food intake that enables you to stick to your 5:2 plans and achieve sustainable weight loss, try keeping a food and mood diary. Making a note of how you feel physically and mentally on fast days can be an effective way to track how well you're coping with the regimen. Simply jot down what foods/meals you eat, when you have them and any accompanying feelings of hunger, mood or wavering will power. Registering when you feel at your weakest and strongest on a fast day can help you to tailor future fast days so that they are easier.

More than 500 or 600 calories?

Some regimes allow up to 700 calories on fast days, but if you increase calories on these two days you'll probably have to look at introducing some restrictions on the other five days, too. The amount of 500 or 600 calories is 25 per cent of the normal average calorie requirement, and emulates the protocol used by some preliminary but successful alternate day fasting human studies completed at the University of Illinois at Chicago (a 5:2 fasting regimen is a more achievable version of alternate day fasting, and you'll probably find it easier to stick to).

While a handful of calories either way isn't going to make much difference, if it becomes obvious you're going to breach 500 or 600 calories by a large amount, abandon ship and count the day as a non-fast one.

WHAT DOES 500 CALORIES LOOK LIKE?

Admittedly not a lot – but then that is, after all, somewhat the point! As a rough guide, 500 calories would be:

- **Breakfast:** A small bowl (30 g/1 oz) of bran flakes with 125 ml (4 fl oz) semi-skimmed milk, plus a handful (80 g/3 oz) each of blueberries and strawberries (200 calories).
- **Dinner:** Half a 400 g (13 oz) can of bean soup followed by 100 g (3½ oz) prawns with a dessert bowl of salad of rocket, peppers, tomato and cucumber dressed with 1 tablespoon of low-fat balsamic dressing (250 calories).
- **Snack:** ½ banana (50 calories).
- **Men have another 100 calories to play with, which is the equivalent of adding half a slice of toast spread with 1 scant dessertspoon of peanut butter.**

If this looks daunting, don't worry – there are lots of tips for making your fasting day as painless as possible in the following pages. While most intermittent fasters will find it challenging at first, the process gets much easier as your body adapts.

Fast day eating

Theoretically you could have a large burger and endless cups of black coffee on a fast day and be within your calorie allowance, but clearly this wouldn't be at all good for you! Instead, it's a great idea to use your fasting day to make balanced and healthy choices, using the following guidelines.

Eat five a day

Your fast day is the perfect opportunity to fill up on fruit and veg as these foods are bulky and low in calories, take up plenty of room on your plate (a psychological boost!) and are linked with a lower risk of killer diseases such as heart disease and cancer. Green leafy vegetables, such as spinach, kale, watercress, rocket, broccoli and cabbage, are particularly low in calories, as are berries, such as strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants, which you'll often find in convenient form in the freezer section of the supermarket. Tomatoes, peppers, orange-fleshed melons and butternut squash join the low-calorie corner – the wonderful thing about all these richly coloured fruit and veg is they consistently appear in superfood lists because of their high antioxidant content (antioxidants are the component in fruit and veg that mop up the free radicals that can damage our cells).

In short, by using your fast day as a chance to eat at least five colourful portions of fruit and veg a day (a portion is around 80 g/3 oz, or roughly a handful), you'll be boosting your health as well as benefiting your waistline.

Dairy and pulses

These two deserve a special mention because they're unusual in providing a combination of carbs and protein in one easy package and are a great source of vitamins and minerals. They can be easy on the waistline too – 0% Greek yogurt (a great topping for fruit) has only 57 calories in a 100 g (3½ oz) serving, while creamy canned butter beans (fabulous to bulk out a salad) have 56 calories in a 60 g (2½ oz) serving.

Include lean protein

The lowest calorie lean protein sources (all weighing in at less than 100 calories for a 100 g/3½ oz portion) include prawns, tofu and tuna canned in water, though grilled fish, eggs and chicken breast are also very good choices. Including one or more of these protein foods on a fast day is to be recommended, as you're more likely to preserve valuable muscle tissue during periods of calorie restriction when protein is consumed (and particularly if you exercise, too). Another big bonus is that

protein is particularly good at keeping you full, so can help to keep hunger pangs at bay for longer. Digesting it also uses up more calories than does digesting other nutrients, which is all grist to the mill of your diminishing middle!

Choose quality carbs

Admittedly you won't be able to eat very big carb portions on a fast day (there are around 100 calories in just one slice of bread, for example), but it's a good idea to make sure any modest portions you do choose are as unprocessed or nutrient rich as possible, and to focus on higher fibre choice where you can. Wholemeal breads, porridge oats, wholewheat pasta, pearl barley, fortified wholegrain breakfast cereals and potatoes in their skins tend to have a relatively low glycaemic index or GI, which means they raise blood sugar levels only relatively slowly, helping to keep blood sugar, energy and appetite levels more controlled.

Perhaps more important, though, is *not* to spend too many (if any) of your fast day calories on sweet and sugary carbohydrates, such as biscuits or dessert. (A rough rule of thumb would be for women to use no more than 50 calories on these foods, and men no more than 100 calories.) Quite apart from their lack of nutrient value, they'll really challenge your ability to stay on track because they can cause your blood sugar levels to fluctuate, heightening feelings of hunger.

Drink options

It is important to stay well hydrated on fast days (see [Keep Well Hydrated](#)), but with the exception of low-fat milk (or a milk alternative, such as soya milk), many drinks can be a wasteful, non-filling way to spend calories. Your best options on a fast day are calorie-free drinks, such as black coffee and tea (though try not to drink more caffeine than you would normally), herbal teas, diet drinks and of course (and best of all), good old water. To jazz it up, try a sparkling variety and add a squeeze of lime or lemon.

Alcohol is one of the least sensible choices of all (even the smallest glass of wine has around 100 calories and could stimulate your appetite) so use your fast days to abstain from alcohol altogether and give your liver two days a week of much needed rest!

PERFECT FAST DAY PROPORTIONS

- Concentrate on fruit and veg (steamed, grilled, stir-fried or in soups and salads) as your main stomach-filling priority (up to 200 calories).
- Use most of the remaining calories (300 or 400) on low GI carbohydrate-rich and/or protein-rich foods.
- Any calories you have left over you can use as you wish (see the lists of [50 calorie](#) and [100 calorie snack suggestions](#)). But choosing more nutritious foods is always best.

TOP TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

- The day before your first fast, eat well and aim to go to bed feeling neither hungry nor overfull. Getting an early night is good preparation. Trying to stuff in as much food as late as possible so you don't feel hungry tomorrow is not!
- Do your eating homework so that you know how you are going to spend your 500 or 600 calories, and which meals you are going to spread them between. Use the recipes in this book as inspiration and make sure you are stocked up with the requisite ingredients.
- Try to make your environment as devoid of food temptations as possible, which means ensuring a stray slice of pork pie isn't the thing screaming, 'eat me!' when you open the fridge.
- Arm yourself with some kind of calorie counter – [here](#) is one to get you started – or you can use an online app or website.
- Be aware that choosing a less busy day to start your fasting may not be the best approach. As long as you have your food choices pre-planned, a day with plenty to keep you occupied may be better.
- If you find your first fast too hard and have to give in, you've probably just chosen the wrong day. Don't despair and try again another time, but leave it a few days.

Fast day feel-full tips

- Water is the perfect slimline filler, either drunk on its own to temporarily take the edge off a hunger pang or, more particularly, incorporated within food to increase satiety (the feeling of fullness that food imparts). Chunky soups plus lots of fruit and veg can work particularly well

a fast day because they'll help to make your stomach feel full.

- Airy foods take up more space on your plate (so, psychologically, it feels like you're being presented with more food), as well as in your stomach. One study by Professor Barbara Rolls at Pennsylvania State University, published in the journal *Appetite*, compared the same snack in a puffed and non-puffed version and found that those receiving the airy snack ate 73 per cent more in volume, but consumed 21 per cent fewer calories. Rice cakes are the ultimate airy food, and a whipped mousse (which can have fewer than 80 calories per pot) is the way to go if you really can't do without dessert!
- Protein-rich foods are particularly good at inducing satiety. One theory is that they stimulate the release of hunger-controlling hormones in the gut. The protein in eggs seems particularly good at keeping you full, so give them a try!
- Wholegrain versions of breakfast cereals, breads, pasta, rice and noodles take longer to chew and are more satisfying, as the fibre they contain provides bulk but no calories. Fibre also has a slowing effect on the passage of food through the gut, which has the effect of keeping you fuller for longer. The portion size of bread or pasta you can have on a fast day is small, but choosing a 'brown', not 'white', version can help to make it more filling.
- Focus on whole foods. On average, foods that aren't highly processed, pre-packaged or high in sugar will tend to be lower GI and keep your blood sugar levels on a more even keel.

Don't estimate!

Building up an accurate picture of what actually constitutes 500 or 600 calories (see [What Does 500 Calories Look Like?](#)) is one of the most educational and interesting aspects of the 5:2 diet. It can help you understand what constitutes a healthy portion and might also give a clue as to why you ended up needing to lose a few pounds in the first place.

It won't come as a surprise, then, that 'estimates' and 'educated guesses' are definitely not okay when it comes to calculating your fast day calories. With the best will in the world you'll almost certainly be wrong, which will jeopardize your weight loss and dilute the health benefits. If you're not convinced, try seeing if you can correctly estimate the 'recommended' 30 g (1 oz) serving of flake-style breakfast cereal, such as bran flakes. Most people pour nearer to 50–60 g (2–2½ oz) into the bowl, which can add over 100 'accidental' calories and completely destroy a fasting day.

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