

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall: Why I'm on the Fast Diet

Fasting diets are all the rage. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has been on one since New Year, and it seems to be working. But how long will it last?



Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

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Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has lost eight pounds since New Year, by fasting for two days out of seven, and has found the whole thing "rather exhilarating". Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

I'm not a serial dieter, or any kind of dieter, but I am interested in what we eat, how we eat, and how it affects our health. Sometimes I think, with mounting impatience, that it's all so bloody obvious. Michael Pollen has it pretty much right in his book *In Defence of Food*: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants." Five a day is the government's rather patronising version of that – and woefully fails to emphasise how important it is that most of those plants are freshly cooked in their whole, natural form (or better still, eaten raw).

I can't claim too much high ground here. At the turn of the year, like so many, I consumed way too much meat, cheese, cream, sugar and alcohol. And despite a garden bursting with brussels sprouts, kale and winter salads, and a weekly delivery of organic apples, oranges, clementines and bananas, I know I didn't eat nearly enough fruit and veg to offset the gluttony. And so I've been patting a tummy I didn't have a few weeks ago, and wondering what to do about it.

But now I find myself beguiled, for the first time ever, really, by a new diet. *The Fast Diet*, by Michael Mosely and Mimi Spencer, makes a compelling promise that with regular fasting (they propose two days out of every seven) you will quickly lose weight, while on non-fast days you can continue to eat (and, importantly, drink) whatever you like.

This isn't the first time I've tried to shed a few pounds. Previous, successful attempts have not been guided by books, or any form of calorie-counting, but by a self-imposed period of abstinence from the two things I know put pounds on me – alcohol and dairy products. They are also two things I am not planning to abstain from in the longer term – so it isn't really a sustainable approach to keeping trim.

But *The Fast Diet* says I can continue to butter my bread, cheese my butter, and raise my glass – at least for five days a week. It also promises much more than mere weight loss. It will reduce my bad cholesterol, protect me against cancer and even sharpen my mind. It pretty much promises that I will live longer, and healthier. As my half century approaches, that's quite a punchy proposition. So let's take it seriously for a moment.

The reason we're in such a mess with food is evolution, progress. We no longer fight for our meals. We don't even need to burn a few calories acquiring the next one. The high-energy foods that were once such a prize that we'd risk life and limb for them are now constantly within reach. We can mainline sugar and fat effortlessly. So any diet that claims to offer a solution to our crisis needs to make evolutionary sense. If I was going to write a diet book (I'm not), I would call it *The Bonobo Diet*, and it would recommend that we all sit in extended family groups, for a couple of hours every day, eating a large pile of something good: apples one day, nuts the next, perhaps roast chicken the day after that. It wouldn't catch on, would it? But I think it would be sound.

Many of the problems we give ourselves through the modern diet stem from the fundamentally flawed habit of piling a lot of different, unrelated ingredients on to a plate and scoffing them at high speed. Meat, wheat and cheese (the burger) – clearly foolhardy. Chocolate, sugar, butter, flour (the brownie) – delicious, but insane. These compound meals, too often glued together with synthesised products our bodies don't even recognise as food, curdle and rot in our stomachs, giving us varying degrees of nausea, acid reflux, gaseousness and cramp, and pushing our stressed digestive systems to the absolute limit. No wonder we're bloating like dead whales and dropping like flies.

Of course, I realise that all my books and television shows are largely complicit with this disastrous approach to eating. I like to think I am at the healthier, more natural end of the spectrum – in fact, my professional self-respect is predicated on that. But I think it would be unwise not to acknowledge that even the "River Cottage diet" – rich as it ought to be in fresh vegetables and fruit – is open to abuse. And I should know; I abuse it often enough. The fact is that even those of us who know exactly what a sensible, restrained and healthy diet looks like still struggle to keep to one much of the time. Hardly anyone on the planet eats for optimal health. The industrialisation of food is now universal, and even the supposedly healthier culinary cultures are losing their way. Did you know that Italy now has the biggest **obesity** problem in Europe, or that **China farms more pork intensively** than the rest of the world put together? The bad eating habits we've acquired are species-wide, and they're not about to go away.

This is what's fascinating about fasting. It seems to offer a possible way out of this tragic culinary cul de sac – for human health, at least, if not for global food production. Starve yourself once in a while, as our antecedents did for millions of years, by force of circumstance, and your body and digestive system go into recover and repair mode, giving rise to a whole host of physical benefits.