

“I Don’t Fast”... *or Do I?*

Fasting for weight loss and fasting-like behaviours among university students in Greece.



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Question for you:

Right now, do you
fast for weight loss
or any other
reason?



Fasting....?



**Weight/ fat
loss**

Athleticism

Convenience

**Irregular
Schedules**

**Sleeping
through
breakfast**

Many people immediately say “**no, I don’t fast**” but report fasting-like behavioural patterns...



Definition: fasting for *weight loss*

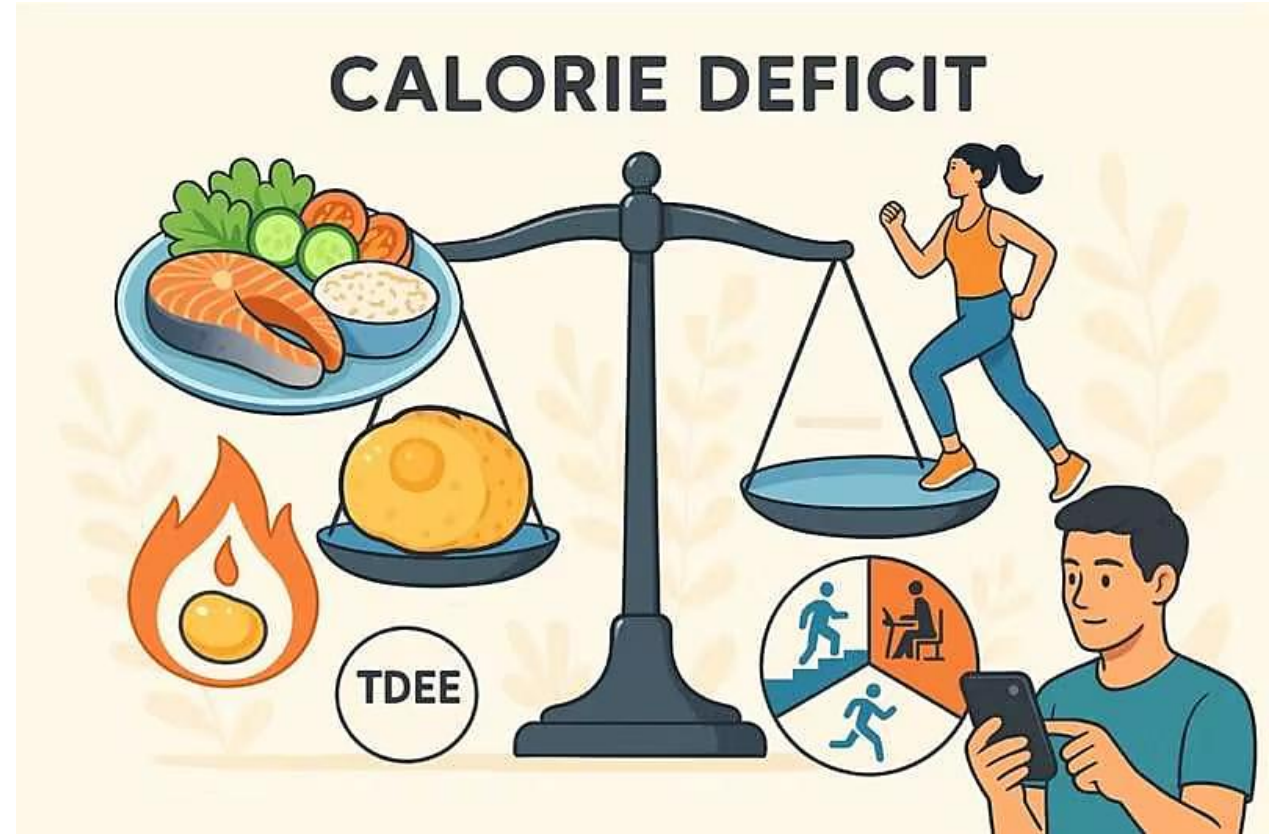
In questionnaire and information sheet: Fasting is about **when** we eat, **not** what we eat. Fasting involves voluntarily abstaining for hours or days from some or all foods and beverages that contain calories.

In this study, we use the general term ‘fasting’ to refer to all types of fasting aimed at **weight loss**. This study does **not** examine fasting undertaken for ideological, religious, political, or other reasons.

Question for you:

Why should anyone fast for weight loss purposes, instead of just sticking to diet and exercise?

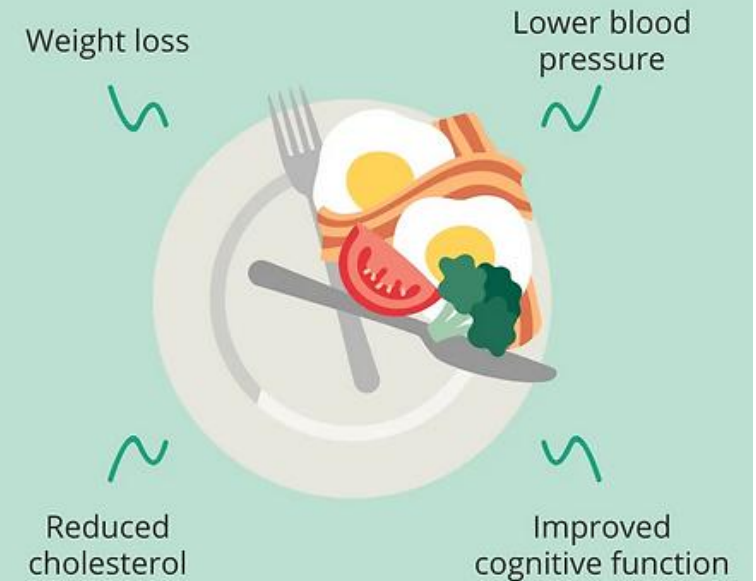
The answer shows why research into fasting is growing...



Why fast for weight loss?

- Traditional weight loss strategies not effective in (sustaining) weight loss
- Does not require exercising
- No calorie counting/restriction
- No food restrictions
- Reduces snacking or overeating
- Fits busy modern lifestyles
- Has broader health benefits

Possible Health Benefits of Intermittent Fasting





Why study university students?



**Irregular
Schedules**



**Training &
Sport**



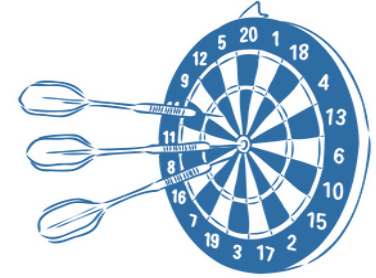
**Social
Eating**



**Financial
Pressures**

Student life naturally influences eating timing and structure through irregular sleep, sports, nightlife, social eating, financial limitations, shifting routines...

The study's aims



1

Examine beliefs and experiences relating to fasting for weight loss among university students in Greece

2

Behaviourally estimate fasting-like patterns using reported eating times

3

Identify possible mismatch between explicit reports and behaviourally-derived fasting-like patterns



Study Design

96

University
Students in Greece

Cross-sectional, computerised, mixed-methods survey

- University of Thessaly ($n = 70$) & University of Crete ($n = 26$)
- Beliefs and experiences of fasting for weight loss
- Daily routines and eating-time patterns
- Quantitative and qualitative responses combined



How did we estimate non-eating (fasting-like) behaviours?



Comparison of explicit self-reports with behavioural fasting-like patterns emerging from students' actual routines.



What students *said* they were doing

2

students reported
currently fasting
for weight loss

But behavioural findings told a different story...



What 37 students were *doing*

~90%

≥10 hours
fasting interval

~73%

≥12 hours
fasting interval

~16%

≥16 hours
fasting interval

**Fasting-like behavioural patterns were substantive despite
very few explicit reports of fasting**



Weekend eating timings were different...

Weekdays

More structured
mealtimes

Weekends

Longer fasting
intervals

Later waking • Nightlife • Socialising • Delayed meals • Less structure



Fasting for weight loss: a complex phenomenon

Body

Body image and metabolism concerns

Self-regulation

Discipline, self-control, and willpower

Social Life

Social eating, peer influence, culture

Conflicting Info

Contradictory messages from media and experts

Fasting was understood as a broader lifestyle and self-regulation practice; not just as a weight loss strategy

Student voices: Fasting as self- and lifestyle regulation

Discipline

Control

Reducing snacking

Simplifying routines

Saving time

Saving money

These ideas make sense in sports environments where bodily control and self-regulation are highly valued

Student voices: Fasting as a self-regulation strategy



Fasting can help reduce overall calorie intake, help better manage hunger, enhance self-discipline and control over eating habits, simplify daily meal planning, and lead to more mindful food choices. Furthermore, it can provide a sense of control and goal achievement, which has a positive psychological effect

Student voices: fasting as a socially embedded practice

Fasting is both facilitated and inhibited by social networks

“

To have someone who does what I do and helps me achieve my goal — parents, family, friends, close friends.

— **Fasting facilitated**

“*...some healthcare professionals who consider fasting unsuitable without supervision, family members who are concerned about my health, and friends who believe that weight loss should only be achieved through a balanced diet would disagree with my fasting.*

— **Fasting inhibited**

Confusion & Contradiction

Students seemed unsure about what counts as fasting...

Viewed Positively 😊

- Healthy and scientific
- Evidence-based practice
- Effective for weight management

Viewed Negatively 😬

- Restrictive and dangerous
- Unsustainable long-term
- Confused with calorie restriction

Influences: Social media • Coaches • Nutritionists • Family • Religion • Diet culture

Student voices: fasting for weight loss misunderstood

*Students linked fasting to religion and restriction, **despite** being offered fasting definitions indicating otherwise...*

“

Christianity, athleticism, a stable financial situation, and more affordable prices at the supermarket, these encourage fasting for weight loss.

“

...fasting involves the deprivation of favorite foods, coupled with a reduction in protein intake, difficulty accessing Lenten foods.



Defining “fasting for weight loss”

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A broader psychological point

Behaviour and label do not always align

Students showed fasting-like behavioural patterns without explicitly labeling themselves as people who fast for weight loss.

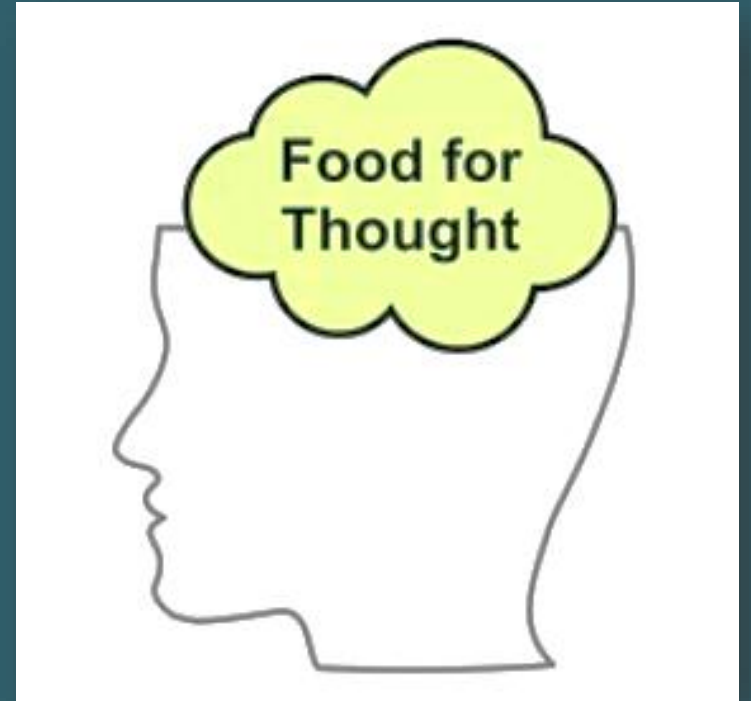
People's routines and behavioural patterns may emerge before a clear identity or label develops...

Reflection:

Sometimes behaviour comes first...and
the label comes later...

? Has this ever happened to you ?

Why might this happen?



Thank You

Thoughts? Questions?

Dr Cleo Protogerou, University of Crete, Greece
Dr Maria Hassandra, University of Thessaly, Greece

Indicative studies on fasting & health-related outcomes

- Berthelot, E., Etchecopar-Etchart, D., Thellier, D., Lancon, C., Boyer, L., & Fond, G. (2021). Fasting interventions for stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Nutrients*, 13(11), 3947.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13113947>
- Chen, Y. E., Tsai, H. L., Tu, Y. K., & Chen, L. W. (2024). Effects of different types of intermittent fasting on metabolic outcomes: An umbrella review and network meta-analysis. *BMC Medicine*, 22(1), 529. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-024-03716-1>
- de Cabo, R., & Mattson, M. P. (2019). Effects of intermittent fasting on health, aging, and disease. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 381(26), 2541-2551.
<https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMr1905136>
- Seimon, R. V., Roekenes, J. A., Zibellini, J., Zhu, B., Gibson, A. A., Hills, A. P., ... & Sainsbury, A. (2015). Do intermittent diets provide physiological benefits over continuous diets for weight loss? A systematic review of clinical trials. *Molecular and Cellular Endocrinology*, 418(2), 153-172.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mce.2015.09.014>