

An Observational Study to Assess the Physical, Social, Psychological and Spiritual Aspects of Fasting

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Abstract:

Introduction: "Fasting is primarily a willing abstinence from food, drink or both for a period of time". As we know our country is a land of different religions and in every religion, fasting is practiced in one way or the other. From religious point of view- It inculcates in man the spirit of abstinence from sins and cultivation of virtues. From scientific point of view-Fasting is said to occur as long as fat and carbohydrates are used as energy source. The 3 scientifically proved advantages being- it promotes detoxification, enhances healing process, and increases life expectancy.

Aims & Objective: To assess how far it affects the various dimensions of health namely physical, social, psychological and spiritual and thus our lives and to know the impact of socio economic status of people as well as education on fasting.

Methodology: - A cross-sectional observational study was carried out by Door to door survey and data was collected by interview method over 300 randomly selected people of different localities of Indore (Lalaram Nagar, Bakhtawarram nagar, Tilak Nagar, KanchanBagh, Geetabhavan, jaora compound) for duration of four months (oct-13 to jan-14). Study tool consists of a questionnaire mainly contained questions related to demography, physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of fasting. The questionnaire was pre tested life expectancy. by conducting a pilot study involving a small sample from the community. Inclusion criteria includes the People who observed either short term fasting (<10 days) or long term fasting (>10 days). Peoples who did not observe fast were excluded from this study.

Conclusion: Most of the people did fasting due to spiritual and religious cause and became more aware of their family traditions. It was found from the study that social interaction. Brotherhood and communal harmony is increased amongst people and they indulged themselves more in charity and other religious activities. Most of the people had no bad effects on their health like no indigestion, weight loss, weakness and other health related issues. However, some people continued their fasting in spite of worsening of their health problems might be due to social or religious reasons. Some people prioritize religion more than their health during fasting.

Keywords: Willing Abstinence, Religious, Detoxification, Healing process, Life expectancy.

I. Introduction

Fasting is primarily an act of willing abstinence or reduction from certain or all food, drink, or both, for a period of time¹. An **absolute fast** is normally defined as abstinence from all food and liquid for a defined period, usually a single day (24 hours), or several days². Other fasts may be only partially restrictive, limiting particular foods or substances. The fast may also be intermittent in nature. Fasting for long periods (many days) can be a difficult and even dangerous experience for many, especially for those living in stressful or polluted environments. Yet fasting is the only real natural way to cure or alleviate almost any ill. It's powerful, effective, quick (that's why it's called "fast"-ing), and best of all – its free³.

Of course, some problems, such as a broken bone or serious injury may require medical help or assistance, but for most ailments or diseases, fasting is the answer⁴. Your body is your own best doctor and is always trying to heal or regenerate itself-if you let it. That's just the problem, most of us are so ignorant about our bodies and so addicted to certain bad habits that we never really give it a chance to heal properly. Only through pain and discomfort (the body's danger signals) are we made to listen. And even then we do not always understand what our bodies are trying to tell us.

Some Benefits of Fasting

Anti-ageing effects

Better resistance to diseases

Change of habits

Better attitude

Better sleep

Clearer planning Creativity , Clearer skin

Drug detoxification	Diet changes
Improved senses (vision, hearing, taste)	Inspiration
More clarity (mentally and emotionally)	More energy
More relaxation	New ideas
Reduction of allergies	Purification
Rest for digestive organs	Rejuvenation
Right use of will	Revitalization
Spiritual awareness	Weight loss

Physical effects of fasting

Fasting has been called the "miracle cure" because the list of physical conditions improved by fasting is long and varied⁵. Cited most often are allergies, arthritis, digestive disorders of all kinds, skin conditions, cardiovascular disease, and asthma. **Because fasting initiates the body's own healing mechanisms, any ailment may show improvement.**

Fasting frees up energy so healing can begin

Fasting is a wonderful antidote for our usual over-indulgences. There's nothing wrong with enjoying our food, but excess food on a continuous basis, does create a burden for the body. When body handles more than what is comfortable and appropriate for it, will suffer.

During fasting, we rest our system from the constant onslaught of food stuffs. We usually think of food as giving us energy, so it can be a new way of thinking to understand how the food we eat actually requires energy. Digesting, assimilating and metabolizing--these activities require a great deal of energy. **It is estimated that 65% of the body's energy is directed to the digestive organs after a heavy meal.**

Free up this energy and it can be diverted to healing and recuperation. It can detoxify and repair cells, tissues and organs, eliminating foreign toxins as well as the natural metabolic wastes (which are also toxins) produced even by our healthy cells. Fasting itself isn't necessarily a "cure" for anything. What it does is "set the stage" or create the environment in which healing can occur. Our bodies know how to heal themselves. We just have to "get out of the way", and this means on all levels of our being. Fasting has a way of rebalancing us on all those levels.

Physically, fasting is of high benefit to the chronic degenerative diseases that are plaguing our population and that modern medicine is at loss to cure.

Mental and emotional benefits of fasting

Because fasting improves mental clarity and focus, it can become a tool in your life to give you greater freedom, flexibility, and energy to get done the things and projects that are important to you.

Many experienced fasters find it helpful to fast whenever they need an additional boost for a major project or deadline, e.g. writing a paper, preparing for a big presentation, getting ready for a long trip. Artists and writers often talk of foregoing food during great creative inspiration; that it helps to keep the momentum going. Although, beginners must be warned that this won't be the case at first. Don't fast for a big event until you are more knowledgeable about your fasting reactions, and you're sure you won't get a "detox headache" or such.)

Emotionally, you will feel calmer, clearer and happier. Fasters often report that depression lifts, goals begin to feel more obtainable as obstacles are put into proper focus. Doctors have reported patients experiencing improved concentration, less anxiety, sleeping better and waking more refreshed.⁶

Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between our emotional and mental aspects, where one begins and the other ends. Am I sad because I had this thought? Or did I have the thought because I've been feeling sad? Fasting has a way of clarifying those issues. Your awareness can focus in more accurately and determine the source of some unpleasantness, that has been snowballed into a mess. Once the source is identified, it's easy to see how overblown everything else was that came after. In other words, you see things from a clearer, more appropriate perspective.

Spiritual benefits of fasting

And let's not forget the powerful effects of fasting on our spiritual connection. Another one of the benefits of fasting is that it promotes our attention inwards and thus we become quiet. And that quietness allows greater sense of kinship with your Inner Being.

Without the continual addition of heavy foods into the system (and after any major detox symptoms have passed), the body takes on a lighter, less dense, feeling. This helps to create a subtle separation from ordinary physical reality and all its worldly things, and instead you begin to sense the presence and power of things beyond this world.

Meditation or prayer becomes clearer, higher states easier to attain, messages or guidance from higher realms clearer. Knowing you are loved and supported every minute of your day and of your life is something you begin to intuitively feel. Recognition that there truly is a higher plan or purpose will become more real as it is intuitively experienced rather than just intellectually understood. Your experiences will be deeply personal and unique, Sometimes, subtle too. You have to pay attention to the little things; you have to be quiet enough internally to pick up the nuances in a changed attitude or perception.

Medical Application

Fasting is often indicated prior to surgery or other procedures that require general anaesthetics, because of the risk of pulmonary aspiration of gastric contents after induction of anaesthesia (i.e., vomiting and inhaling the vomit, causing life-threatening aspiration pneumonia).⁷

Additionally, certain medical tests, such as cholesterol testing (lipid panel) or certain blood glucose measurements require fasting for several hours so that a baseline can be established. In the case of cholesterol, failure to fast for a full 12 hours (including vitamins) will guarantee an elevated triglyceride measurement. People near the end of their lives sometimes consciously refuse food and/or water. The term in the medical literature is patient refusal of nutrition and hydration.

II. Materials & Methods

A cross-sectional observational study was carried out by Door to door survey and data was collected by interview method over 300 randomly selected people of different localities of Indore (Lalaram Nagar, Bakhtawarram nagar, Tilak Nagar, Kanchan Bagh, Geetabhavan, Jaora compound) for duration of four months (oct-13 to jan-14). Study tool consists of a questionnaire mainly contained questions related to demography, physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of fasting. The questionnaire was pre tested life expectancy by conducting a pilot study involving a small sample from the community. Inclusion criteria includes the People who observed either short term fasting (<10 days) or long term fasting (>10 days). Peoples who did not observe fast were excluded from this study.

III. Results

The present study was done on randomly selected 300 people of different localities of Indore who observed fasting. Among the people who fast, 38.66% were educated up to 12th class followed by 31 % who were graduate and 26.66% who were post-graduates. 52.33% of people lived in joint family whereas 47.66% of people lived in nuclear family indicating that people living in joint family used to do more fasting as compared to that of nuclear family. 44% people that did fasting had monthly family income less than 1 lakh followed by 22.33% of persons fasting with a monthly family income between 1-2 lakhs. 81.66% of people observed fasting for less than 10 days continuously followed by 18.33% of people fasted for more than 10 days continuously. In response to reasons of fasting 85.33% of people did fasting for religious reasons followed by 7.66% fasted to follow the family traditions whereas only 5% did fasting for health benefits. Nearly 50% of people took 1 time meal during fasting followed by 27% also took snacks along with one time meal. 58.66% of all persons in the present study observed fasting during navratri followed by 10.33% in paryushan and 10% during ramjan.

Effect On Physical Aspect:-

52.66% people had no weight loss during fasting. 42.33% of people never felt weakness during fasting. In 62.33% people, problem of indigestion never happened, while 27 % got their problem of indigestion corrected. 38% of people got their health problem worsened/ increased i.e. they continued fasting knowing that it can increase their health related problem. 57% of people said that amount of meal taken in fast never exceeded normal diet; it means that fasting provides rest to the digestive machinery at least for the fasting period. 45% people said that their appetite had not decreased means fasting do not alter the normal appetite.

Effect On Psychological Aspect:-

In our studies fasting has shown following changes / improvements in psychology- 58.66% people avoided strenuous work during fast. In 58% people, fasting had increased craving for food. In 54% of people, quarrelsome behaviour is reduced during fasting while 18.33% didn't find any change in their behaviour. 53% of people felt happy and calm while 5% got angry and irritable. 48% people had overcome their boredom and mental tension while 33% had no change during fasting period. Fasting had increased the decision making power & determination of most of the people.

Effect On Social Aspect:-

Fasting has shown to increase communal harmony and increased social interaction among children. Maximum no. of persons (> 85 %) does fasting for religious cause thus fasting has made people more social due

to increased religious interaction. 37.66% people continued the same regular and healthy eating habits after fast that they had observed during fast, which had proved that fasting made lives more regular and disciplined. 51.66% people said that fasting increased their social interaction. 56.3% people found that their tolerance and patience capacity increased during fasting. 48.3% people found their daily schedule comfortable with fasting.

Effect On Spiritual Aspect:-

72.3% people got more familiar with the religious tradition & customs of their family during fasting. During fast, 73.6% people got more indulged in the charity & other religious activities. 83.6% people got motivated to be a good human being during fasting by virtue of the spiritual knowledge they got during that period.

IV. Discussion

It the present study it was found that a significant weight loss was noticed during fasting in about 47.3% of respondents. Therefore fasting might be an alternative for weight control in comparison to daily diet restriction. In a similar study conducted in 2010 by Dr Michelle Harvie⁸ the researchers did find that women placed on a 5:2 diet (2 days fasting in a week) achieved similar levels of weight loss as women placed on a calorie-controlled diet. They also experienced reductions in a number of biological indicators (biomarkers) that suggest a reduction in the risk of developing chronic diseases such as type II diabetes. So our findings are in accordance to this study.

A previous study in 2012 suggested that the 5:2 model may help lower the risk of certain obesity-related cancers, such as breast cancer. The increasing popularity of the 5:2 diet should lead to further research of this kind. A 2007 Halagappa VKM, Guo Z, Pearson M, et al⁹ looking at the effects of Intermittent Fasting in humans in terms of real-world health outcomes concluded that Intermittent Fasting (specifically, alternative day fasting) may have a protective effect against heart disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer. However, it concluded "more research is required to establish definitively the consequences of ADF (alternative day fasting)".

One Latest Research on Intermittent Fasting¹⁰ concluded that on some days you eat as you normally would. On other days you cut your calories to a quarter of your normal intake. Advocates say this feast and famine approach mimics how humans ate for thousands of years. They argue that the benefits may extend beyond weight loss to staving off Alzheimer's disease and even preventing some types of cancer.

The body apparently benefits from a state of mini-starvation. One theory is that the process produces just enough stress in cells to be good. "What our evidence suggests is that nerve cells in animals that are on dietary energy restriction are under mild stress," Mattson¹¹ says. "It's a mild stress that stimulates the production of proteins that protect the neurons against more severe stress." Similarly the present study reveals that the fasting helps in relieving the stressful condition.

V. Conclusion

Most of the people had no bad effects on their health during fasting, like no indigestion, weight loss, weakness and other health related issues. However, some people continued their fasting in spite of worsening of their health problems might be due to social or religious reasons. It was found from the study that social interaction, brotherhood and communal harmony is increased amongst people and they indulged themselves more in charity and other religious activities. The daily schedule of people became regular and got relieved of their subjective feelings like – depression, mental tension, loneliness and boredom. Most of the people did fasting due to spiritual and religious cause and became more aware of their family traditions. Some people prioritize religion more, than their health during fasting.

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Table 1- Showing Physical aspects related to fasting.

Reduction in weight during fasting			Feeling of weakness during fasting		
Option	No. of people	%	Option	No. of people	%
< 5 kg	119	39.66	Only during strenuous work	82	27.37
5 – 10 kg	19	6.33	In initial period of fasting	73	24.33
> 10 kg	4	1.33	Throughout the fasting	18	6
Nothing	158	52.66	Never	127	42.33
TOTAL	300	100	TOTAL	300	100
Problem of indigestion during fasting			Any routine work that the people neglected during fasting period		
Option	No. of people	%	Option	No. of people	%
Got corrected	82	27.33	Exercise	49	16.33
Got worsen	31	10.33	Use of vehicle, in Place of walking	36	12
Never happened	187	62.33	Avoided strenuous work	176	58.66
TOTAL	300	100	None	39	13
			TOTAL	300	100

Table 2- Showing Psycho-Social aspects related to fasting.

Increase of social interaction and communal harmony due to fasting-			During fasting time do you avoid tobacco or any other related abuse substances-		
Option	No of people	%	Option	No of people	%
Yes, definitely	155	51.66	Yes	162	54
To some extent	75	25	Some reduction	38	12.66
No	70	23.33	No	31	10.33
TOTAL	300	100	Not ever taken.	69	23
			TOTAL	300	100
Increase in tolerance and patience because of fasting			Getting rid of boredom, loneliness and mental tension because of fasting?		
Yes	169	56.3			
To some extent	95	31.6	Yes, definitely	143	47.6
No	36	12	No change	99	33
TOTAL	300	100	Don't know	58	19.3
Yes	169	56.3	TOTAL	30	100
Change in behaviour during fasting?			Increase in decision making power and determination due to fasting?		
Became calm and happy	159	53	Yes	139	46.3
Became angry and irritable	15	5	To some extent	94	31.3
No change	126	42	Not at all	66	22
TOTAL	300	100	TOTAL	300	100

Table 3- Showing Spiritual aspects related to fasting.

Reasons for fasting			Increased familiarity with the religious traditions and customs of family because of fasting?		
Options	No. of people	%	Options	No of people	%
Religious	256	85.33	Yes	217	72.3
Family traditions	23	7.66	To some extent	65	21.6
Health benefit	15	5	No	18	6
Any other reason	6	2	TOTAL	300	100
TOTAL	300	100			
Increased interest in charity and other religious activities due to fasting?			Effect of religious and spiritual knowledge gained during fasting in influencing one to become a good human being?		
Yes	221	73.6	Yes, definitely	251	83.6
To some extent	50	16.6	To some extent	40	13.3
Same as before	29	9	No	09	3
TOTAL	300	100	TOTAL	300	100

Figure 1- Showing Different Reasons for fasting.

