



Does Fasting Help Treat Depression?

With reference to Michael Greger M.D. FACLM on July 22, 2025



Caloric restriction can boost levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which is considered to play a critical role in mood disorders.

For more than a century, fasting has been espoused as a treatment of supposed "great utility in the preservation of health," especially rejuvenating the body and, above all, the mind. When people fast for even 18 hours, though, they may get hungry and irritable. After one or two days, positive mood goes down and negative mood goes up, and after three days, fasters can increasingly feel sad, self-blame, and suffer a loss of libido. Then, something strange starts to happen: People experience a "fasting-induced mood enhancement...reflected by decreased anxiety, depression, fatigue, and improved vigor." Studies tend to show this across the board. Once you get over the hump, fasters frequently experience "an increased level of vigilance and a mood improvement, a subjective feeling of well-being, and sometimes of euphoria." And, no wonder, as, by then, endorphin levels may rise by nearly 50 percent.

This enhancement of mood, alertness, and calm [is an interesting phenomenon]. Our body wants us to feel poorly initially so we continue to eat, day to day, when food is available, but if we go a couple of days without food, our body realizes we can't just mope [around on the couch]; we need to get motivated to go out and find some calories.

So, can fasting be used for mood disorders, like depression? It's great that people can feel better after a few days of fasting, but the critical question revolves around the "persistence of mood improvement over time" once fasting ends and eating resumes. The little published evidence we have comes out of Japan and the former Soviet Union, and some of it is just ridiculous, like this study that included women with a variety of symptoms, which the researchers blame mostly on marital conflict. Of course, starving the women made them hungry, but that's what Thorazine is for. If they keep getting injected with an antipsychotic to calm

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Does Fasting Help Autoimmune Diseases?

nutritionfacts.org Dec 31, 2024

Fasting has shown potential benefits for various autoimmune diseases, including lupus, multiple sclerosis, and mixed connective-tissue disease, though most evidence is based on individual case reports rather than large-scale studies. Fasting has the strongest evidence for treating rheumatoid arthritis, with some suggestive benefits for osteoarthritis, but more robust, randomized controlled trials are needed to confirm these findings.

After fasting, many individuals maintained their symptom-free state by adopting a strictly plant-based diet, suggesting the importance of long-term dietary changes in sustaining the benefits of fasting.

Does Fasting Help Rheumatoid Arthritis?

nutritionfacts.org Dec 26, 2024

Fasting, followed by a low-salt, vegan, high-fiber, low-fat, low-protein, and low-sugar diet, has been reported to help manage and even eliminate symptoms of various chronic conditions, including autoimmune diseases and cardiovascular issues.

The shift from an omnivorous to a plant-based diet may positively alter gut flora and reduce the inflammatory response, potentially due to decreased intake of arachidonic acid, a pro-inflammatory fatty acid found in animal products.

Can Fasting Be Healing?

nutritionfacts.org Oct 3, 2024

Research suggests that therapeutic fasting may induce a protective mode in cells through mechanisms like hormesis, reducing oxidative damage, and inflammation, as well as improving energy metabolism. This concept is supported by experiments showing increased resilience in animals subjected to fasting before extreme stressors.



them down, they can sail right through. So, what happened in the study? What would we even do with those results?

Another study, however, skipped the Thorazine. The participants fasted for ten days, but they were also kept in bed all day on "absolute bed rest," completely isolated and "prohibited from seeing other people except the attending doctor and nurse...also denied access to television, radio, newspapers or any other forms of information." So, if people got better or worse, it would be impossible to tease out the effects of the fasting component on its own. But researchers found that they apparently did get better, with efficacy reportedly demonstrated in 31 out of 36 patients suffering from depression.

The researchers concluded that fasting therapy may provide an alternative to the use of antidepressant drugs, "thinking the fasting therapy may be a kind of shock therapy." People are so relieved to be eating again, to get out of solitary confinement, and to even just get out of bed that they report feeling better. That was at the time of discharge, though. How did they feel the next day, the next week, the next month? Fasting is, by definition, unsustainable, so what we want to ideally see are some kind of longer-lasting effects.

Researchers did a follow-up with a few hundred patients, not just a few months later, but after a few years. Of the 69 who were evidently suffering from depression, 90 percent reported feeling good or excellent results at the end of the ten-day fast, and, remarkably, years later, 87 percent of the 62 individuals who replied claimed that they were still doing well...

Why would fasting improve feelings of depression? In addition to the endorphins and the surge in serotonin, the so-called happiness hormone, when we fast, there is a bump in brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which is considered to play a crucial role in mood disorders. Researchers have perked up rodents with it, but we aren't rats or mice. What about us? Humans with major depression have lower levels of BDNF circulating in their bloodstream. Autopsy studies of suicide victims show only about half the BDNF in certain key brain regions, compared to controls, suggesting it may play an important role in suicidal behavior.

We can boost BDNF with antidepressant drugs and electroshock; we can also boost it with caloric restriction. We can get a 70 percent boost in levels after three months of cutting 25 percent of calories out of our daily diet.

Hearty Veggie Soup



Ingredients:

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| 1 medium onion, chopped | 2 t ginger powder |
| 2 garlic cloves, minced | ¼ t cayenne pepper |
| 2 c broccoli chopped | 2 t ground turmeric |
| 2 medium sweet potatoes, diced | 4 t paprika |
| 1 large carrot, chopped | ¼ c nutritional yeast |
| 2 large tomatoes, chopped | 8 c water |

Method:

Wash and prep all the vegetables.

Sauté the onion with 1-2 tablespoons of water until onions are translucent in a large pot. **Add** the minced garlic and **cook** for an additional 2-3 minutes.

Add the rest of the vegetables and spices to the pan and **cook** for about 10 minutes. **Add** 1-2 tablespoons of water at a time, as needed, to keep the vegetables and spices from sticking.

When the carrots and sweet potatoes are soft, **add** the water. **Bring** to a boil and cook for about 3-5 minutes, or until reaches desired texture and temperature.

