

The science of working out while fasting

Discover how exercising on an empty stomach can boost fat burn, improve endurance, and support muscle recovery, backed by research and real-life experience.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

Exercising while fasting may seem like a bad idea. After all, you need energy to work out, and energy comes from food. It is logical to think that exercising in a fasted state would be more challenging and that you would not have the endurance required to perform well. However, studies, workout enthusiasts, and real-life experiences suggest the opposite.

I remember a time in secondary school when I was preparing to run a marathon. I thought that eating something "small" would give me the energy I needed for the tough run, so I had a small serving of bananas. I felt hopeful, believing that the natural sugars would fuel me.

However, about 20 minutes into the run, I was surprised by the discomfort I experienced. I ran out of steam and barely made it back to school in one piece. I quickly realised that it was the bananas that had let me down.

That runner was me. As I approached the finish line, I spotted the teacher who had previously warned me against eating bananas before a run. I regretted not listening to him, especially when I saw him laughing at my struggle. From that experience, I learnt that eating before a workout could be a serious mistake. What I did not know at the time was that having less food in your stomach can actually benefit your workout in many ways, according to research.

The science

Recent research suggests that exercising while in a fasted state, commonly referred to as fasted cardio, can be highly beneficial for improving endurance, aiding in weight loss, and promoting muscle growth. This may sound counterintuitive, but many people find it effective.

A study conducted by Nottingham Trent University revealed that participants who worked out on an empty stomach burnt nearly 70 percent more fat than those who ate two hours before exercising. The researchers explained that this increased fat burning occurs because, during fasted exercise, the body primarily uses stored fat for energy when glycogen levels are low. While this ap-

TIPS

Trying fasted workouts

- Start with light cardio such as walking or jogging in the morning before breakfast.
- Keep sessions short to moderate (30-60 minutes) until you know how your body responds.
- Hydrate well; water is essential even if you skip food.

Dos & Don'ts

- Listen to your body; stop if you feel dizzy, weak, or nauseous.
- Maintain a balanced diet outside workout hours for energy and recovery.
- Do not overdo high-intensity workouts until your body adapts.
- Do not ignore your personal preference; some perform better after a light meal.

Who should avoid it

- People with diabetes, low blood sugar issues, or medical conditions should consult a doctor first.
- Pregnant or breastfeeding women may need tailored advice.

proach may lead to short-term weight loss, the researchers emphasised that consistent training and a balanced diet are essential for effective fat loss in the long term.

In addition to weight loss benefits, fasted workouts can also promote muscle growth. This is because exercising without eating increases insulin sensitivity, which is vital for muscle recovery and overall metabolic health. Furthermore, the study indicated that fasted workouts can boost the secretion of growth hormone, which is important for fat metabolism, tissue repair, and muscle recovery.

"When you exercise in a fasting state, your body is encouraged to tap into fat stores for energy due to lower glycogen levels. This can potentially enhance fat burning and assist with weight loss. Additionally, it may improve insulin

sensitivity, which is beneficial for metabolic health and can help reduce the risk of insulin resistance," the study explains.

Fasted vs fed: What works for you

Many fitness enthusiasts in Kampala advocate for fasted workouts. Jenny Mbabazi, a dedicated walker, has been using regular walking as a way to stay fit since the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. She is now part of the JoeWalker group, where she regularly walks with others to motivate one another.

Mbabazi prefers walking in a fasted state, especially in the morning before breakfast, as she feels her body performs better this way compared to after eating. She believes her morning walks outshine her evening walks in every aspect, particularly because she has already had lunch a few hours before her evening exercise.

"When I walk in a fasted state, my endurance is high, I feel light and fast, and I truly enjoy my walk. I can go for two and a half hours without any issues. However, after lunch, I struggle. My mind feels foggy, and I constantly focus on the remaining mileage, which diminishes my endurance," Mbabazi explains.

She asserts that the body functions better during a workout when it does not have food to digest. Based on her experience, her mental clarity, energy levels, and agility are significantly improved when she is fasted.

On the other hand, some people, such as marathon runner Joseph Odoi, prefer to work out a few hours after eating. Odoi trains regularly and believes he needs the energy from a good meal for his runs. He typically waits at least two hours after eating before exercising.

"Working out after a meal works best for me, although it is generally better when the body has had an hour or two to digest," he shares.

This highlights the fact that everyone is different. What works for some may not work for others. It is essential to experiment with your body to discover what feels right for you, and keep that knowledge handy during your workouts.

o, commonly referred to as fasted in weight loss, and promoting