

The Fast Diet, where you eat 500 calories two days a week, is, er, fast becoming 2013's hottest regime. But what's it like to eat little more than salad a third of the week? 'Revolutionary,' says Mimi Spencer (right) who co-wrote the book – and dropped two dress sizes in six months...

'I'm the poster girl for the Fast Diet'

IT HAD TO BE HARD, RIGHT?

FASTING. A day without food. Surely it would stretch on forever, empty, without the familiar comforts – the lunchtime sandwich, the snacks, the lattes, the happy things that break the day into manageable portions and help the clock tick by. But here I was, 12 hours into a fast day and I felt... well, fine. In control.

The idea of fasting might sound extreme. We're taught, after all, that you should never skip meals, that grazing will 'keep our blood sugar up', that breakfast is important... And yet the hottest diet of 2013 is the Fast Diet – one that turns much of this diet lore on its head. And, after writing a book on the diet and losing 20 pounds in just six months following it, I've become the diet's poster girl. ▶





Mimi has gone from a dress size 12 (far left) to size 8 in six months

Like plenty of women, I've tried countless diets in my time – just to shift that extra weight, the half stone that most of us want to lose, most of the time. I'd 'done' Dukan and Atkins and GI and all the nutty ones too. But, unlike the fad diets we've all tried (and failed), the Fast Diet hinges on the concept of compliance: the idea is that you fast for two days a week, and then eat NORMALLY for the other five. Crucially, it's only restrictive part of the time. This stops you feeling bored, fatigued, empty, miserable – all the things that prevent most diets from working. It's genius, really. Tomorrow is another day – and you can have the cake/pie/pinot grigio then. Really. And you'll still lose weight.

Dr Michael Mosley first brought the phenomena of intermittent fasting to our attention back in August 2012 with his BBC *Horizon* programme documenting the diet's incredible potential, which took inspiration from scientists in the States who have for some time been investigating the known links between alternate day fasting and longevity, and examining its potential for weight loss. One of the key researchers in the field is Dr Krista Varady of the University of Illinois at Chicago, whose work suggests that eating a quarter of one's recommended daily calorie intake on a 'fast day' (500 calories for women, 600 for men), could achieve benefits on a par with those of total fasting. For Michael, and many others, the fact you don't have to entirely starve yourself is what makes the Fast Diet feasible, and sustainable over time.

Like Michael, I usually stick to eating 'just plants and proteins' on a fast day – poached egg for breakfast (no toast, no butter) at

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7am; then a big salad with some protein (houmous, salmon, lean ham) at 7pm. This achieves a longish 'fasting window', which is where the metabolic benefits lie. During that time, calorie-free drinks like black tea, black coffee and herbal teas are allowed. I find chewing sugar-free gum helps too, just to keep my mouth occupied.

I first encountered Dr Mosley when I was asked to write about his take on intermittent fasting for a newspaper feature. His BBC programme had already been viewed by 3 million people – a huge audience for *Horizon* – so it seemed clear to me it had potential to be turned into a book. We wrote it together – Michael covering the science, me on the practicalities of fasting and how to fit it into a busy life. The book has topped the Amazon charts since New Year, and the online forums are on fire. People report weight loss – but, perhaps more importantly, a lifted spirit and a sense of wellness they'd never had when dieting before.

I'm not surprised because, having done the diet, I know it's calibrated and moderate. One of the worries about a fast day is that it might crawl by, without the momentum and energy of meals to punctuate it. If you pick a working day, a day when you've got masses

to occupy yourself, you'll be at an advantage.

I'm now six months in and I've gone from a size 12 to a size 8 for the first time in 20 years. Everything changes when you lose weight and my BMI is in the healthy range. I feel happier, more confident and have started to love things I used to dread like going swimming with my kids. I haven't thrown out all my old clothes yet but it's strange how big my old jeans look.

Everyone I meet mentions my weight loss. I don't think you should be ashamed to say if you lose weight and feel happy. Besides, I'm at pains to say I'm slim, not thin. I have a 10-year-old daughter who I've dedicated the book to, but I'm careful not to glorify thinness. This is my happy weight.

Now I have reached my target weight, I have modified my pattern to a 6:1 rather than a 5:2 – I only fast one day a week. I always eat with my family, even on fast days, but have a modified version of their meal – loads of veggies, steamed fish, salads, ditching their carbs, and no pud. On the other days, dieting doesn't even come into it. Our advice is to eat normally *not* excessively on non-fast days: on five days a week, you're not meant to feel as though you're on a diet, but there's no need to go order the biggest pizza that will fit through your door. In fact, experience tells me that you won't want to. Studies show that people tend to increase their calorie intake marginally on a non-fast day – never enough to compensate for the 75% slash on a fast day. The maths alone means you'll lose weight. And since you are eating normally for the majority of the time, your nutritional intake should remain stable, without the need for supplements. However, up your water intake on a fast day.

Something crucial has changed in my relationship with food. It has been demoted, back in its box, back to a sensible place. That's the greatest change I've noticed. That and the bathroom scales, which seem to smile at me these days. Evidence – anecdotal and clinical, personal and popular – is mounting that intermittent fasting is no fad: it is a sustainable route to good health, with weight loss served up as a glorious side dish. Revolutionary? Reckon so. ■ *'The Fast Diet'* (£7.99, *Short Books*) is available now

