Naturopathic Water Fasting

HISTORY
The origins of fasting date back to the ancient civilizations of Greece and the Near East. Throughout humanity, fasting for religious observance has been used by numerous cultures and religions. References to fasting can be found in the Bible, the Koran, and in the ancient Greek texts. Plato and Socrates were both known to have fasted for days at a time to “attain mental and physical efficiency.” Fasting has long been observed among animals during times of illness, and the use of fasting to treat illness among humans has been employed for centuries. Ancient Egyptians, as well as by the great Greek physician, Hippocrates, used therapeutic fasting to treat numerous health conditions.

In the early 1800’s in America, Dr. Isaac Jennings began to advocate a system of Natural Hygiene that included sunshine, pure water, clean air, exercise, rest, and fasting. This tradition reflected the natural therapies found in spas throughout Europe.

In the 1900’s, Herbert Shelton refined this system of hygiene. He developed a protocol for cleansing that included purified water fasting and complete rest. He formed the American Natural Hygiene Society in 1949, and continued research in this field throughout his life.

BENEFITS OF FASTING
Research dating back to 1880 has provided insight into the health benefits of fasting. Fasting has been used to treat numerous health conditions, including diabetes, skin diseases, obesity, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal disease, arthritis, allergies, autoimmune disease, epilepsy, and chemical poisoning.

Fasting (water-only) is one of the quickest ways to increase the elimination of wastes and enhance the reparative process of the body. It affords the body a period of physiological rest to repair, renew and replenish tissues and organs. Specific benefits include decreased weight, clearer skin, increased elimination, decreased pain and inflammation, and increased concentration and relaxation.

DURATION OF FAST
Short-term water fasts last anywhere from three to five days. Your doctor should perform a physical examination, including any additional tests necessary to ensure your safety while fasting. If you are currently taking medications or have a chronic illness, there may be slight alterations to the regimen. Longer fasts can be beneficial, particularly in the case of chronic illness. However, these fasts are best performed in an in-patient setting where you can be continually monitored.

CONTRAINDICATIONS FOR FASTING
There are some individuals for whom fasting would be contraindicated. Such individuals include those at or under ideal body weight, patients suffering from Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia or related eating disorders, individuals who are cachexic from serious illness, individuals with decreased vitality (elderly, very young children), individuals who fear the process, individuals with various psychological disorders (psychosis, bipolar disorder, dissociative disorders, anxiety, depression, etc.)
FASTING PREPARATION
The ideal time to embark on a fast is when you are able to decrease your daily activities and completely rest in order to enhance the overall benefits of the fast. Most patients find it beneficial to take a nap during the day. Exercise, beyond slow leisure walking, at this time is discouraged to conserve energy and allow maximal healing. Protect yourself from outside stressors and avoid them all, if possible. Psychological, as well as physiological rest is key to allowing the body to maximally benefit from the cleansing.

Fasting must be done with ample preparation of the body. For three days prior to the fast, refined and cooked foods are gradually eliminated, while whole foods and then vegetable juices (or blends using a Vitamix or similar blender) are gradually increased. Only water in the form of filtered or spring water should be taken during the fast. Some experts recommend vegetable juices or greens drinks, however, this is not considered true fasting. Juice fasts are actually a form of elimination diet as nutrients are being ingested.

The quantity of water ingested during a fast is determined by thirst. Be sure to drink several glasses of water daily to prevent dehydration. It is not necessary to supplement with vitamins and minerals during a fast, as nutrient losses are minimal. Speak with your doctor about supplements you take on a regular basis and whether they should be continued during the fast. Avoid the sight and smell of food, if possible. This will help you adhere to the fast, particularly early on when hunger is still present. Try to divert your attention from food by reading, watching a movie, etc.

SUPPORTIVE THERAPIES
Sunlight, and/or other light therapy, is an important part of any natural hygiene regimen. Try to get 10-20 minutes of direct sunlight daily during the fast. Enemas and colonic hydrotherapy are not usually necessary during the fast, however, this will depend upon your overall health and the goals for the fast.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS WHILE FASTING
Normal physiological reactions to fasting include decreases in body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate. This reflects the body’s innate ability to conserve energy. Dress appropriately for the weather and avoid extremes of temperature, including high temperature baths and saunas, as this can drain energy reserves and promote undesirable side effects. When engaging in juice fasts, or modified fasting regimens, these therapies can be beneficial.

Most side effects experienced during fasting are brief and mild. These may be due to withdrawal from stimulants, elimination of waste products, and enhanced repair mechanisms. Common side effects can include headaches, dizziness, nausea, and heart palpitations. These symptoms are generally normal and you may experience all or none of them. Adverse reactions are rare and should be reported to your doctor immediately.

BREAKING THE FAST
The optimal diet for the first two days following a fast includes easily digested foods that will not overburden the body’s digestive capabilities. Essentially, breaking the fast is the reverse of the preparation for the fast, beginning with juices, then raw fruits and vegetables, then a variety of cooked and raw whole foods. It is recommended that you avoid large, high-fat meals, as these may not be well tolerated shortly after a fast. Do not break a fast suddenly, by immediately returning to a regular diet.