

The Longevity Diet

by Zachary A. Knecht, PhD



It's no surprise that the quantity and quality of our food impacts our health and life span. Eat nothing and you won't live long, but eat too much and too poorly and you also risk a plethora of negative outcomes. To this point, a substantial body of research in organisms ranging in complexity from yeast to monkeys has shown that some degree of restrictions on food intake (in contrast to continuously available food), whether via reduced calories, or intermittent fasting can substantially increase healthy lifespans.^[1,2] In *The Longevity Diet* (2018) the aptly named Dr. Valter Longo, brings the fruits of this research right to your recipe book and calendar. In the book, Dr. Longo, director of the Longevity Institute at the University of Southern California, collates research on nutrition and the benefits of fasting into an easily digestible mix of recommendations: stick to high-nutrient, plant-based foods, avoid animal proteins and sugars, and incorporate fasting in specified periods.^[3] Dr. Longo plans to live to 120 by following his own recommendations.^[4]



A healthy vegan salad with vegetables and microgreens. Cold pressed oil from a reusable bottle.

One should always approach diet fads with healthy skepticism. In this case, Dr. Longo's nutritional recommendations bear similarity to the well-known Mediterranean diet, but presumably have similarly positive impacts on mortality and cardiovascular disease.^[5,6] Meanwhile, his recommendations on intermittent fasting are based on the aforementioned body of research that demonstrates increased health and longevity in animal models. Research in humans has been similarly promising, showing a wide range of health improvements in insulin resistance, hypertension, and inflammation, and beneficial cognitive effects on memory, executive function, and cognition, so he's certainly not pulling his recommendations out of a hat.^[7]



In all, it's no great revelation that for the environment and our own sake, we should be striving to eat more healthy plant based foods, less animal protein, and less sugar. Intermittent fasting, meanwhile, can clearly be beneficial and is largely considered safe,^[8] but there is still a large gap in understanding regarding the mechanisms that lead to the observed benefits. Still, if you're looking to improve your diet and health, and possibly live a bit longer, *The Longevity Diet* seems like a good place to start, as it provides recipes and fasting schedules to incorporate into your daily life. Unfortunately we won't know for sure if this diet can extend human lifespans as seen in lab animals until Dr. Longo's 120th birthday in 2087. So until then, we'll just have to take his word for it by eating well and hoping for the best.

Editor's note: If considering intermittent fasting, please discuss with your physician first.

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Dr. Knecht earned his PhD in Neurobiology at Brandeis University and then worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge. His research involved understanding the molecular and cellular basis of tissue regeneration. He currently works as a Senior Medical Writer at Vertex Pharmaceuticals in Boston, Massachusetts. Outside of work he enjoys hiking, cooking and spending time with his wife, son and dog.

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