

Fasting - HEALTH WARNINGS

Part of a discussion about self-denial.

I am NOT an expert on nutrition or eating disorders and certainly not on fasting! My comments and thoughts are based on my previous experience as a GP for over 30 years.

As Craig asks us to consider what role fasting from food MAY have in lives of Christians, I am pleased to have some input because it is a really sensitive subject to tackle. It is potentially a very dangerous behaviour and any discussion about fasting must come with a huge HEALTH WARNING.

Eating Disorders are rife in our society and a huge source of suffering for those affected and their families. People have told me, over the years, that even a chance comment can be the trigger for someone to embark on what can be a long and dangerous road towards self-destruction. There is no way that the Church should set anyone off on such a course or encourage them to continue in that behaviour, so we need to tread with extreme caution.

If you read nothing else, please look at this list of some of the people who are at particular risk if they fast from food:

- people with eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa or who have an “unhealthy” relationship with food
- children and teenagers
- people with a history of self-harm
- people on the autistic spectrum
- diabetics
- people who are underweight
- people having cancer treatment
- people who are pregnant or breast feeding
- people with a heavy alcohol intake
- some people with liver or kidney conditions (seek advice if unsure)
- people on certain medications (check with your pharmacy or surgery if unsure)

UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD- what does this mean ?

The biggest danger to health and even to life is for people who are at risk of taking fasting to extremes and that it becomes an excuse for self-starvation. If you have a history of an EATING DISORDER, such as anorexia nervosa, it is NOT safe to fast for religious reasons. You may have never had a formal diagnosis, but this may well apply to you if you have ever exercised excessively, made yourself sick after eating or taken laxatives when you did not need them. It is often a secret, hidden condition. Often people suffering this way do not recognise that they are unwell or that they are in danger. Fasting is NOT STARVATION; I doubt that people are called to fast to the

extent that they lose weight or become weak or ill. Some people are at particular risk of taking it too far; beware if you have a history of self-harm or if you know you are on the autistic spectrum as you are in particular danger. For those of us who have food readily available, there is a lot more to eating than just fuelling our bodies; we eat, for example, as a social activity, to relieve stress, for pleasure, out of boredom or as a reward or comfort. A lot of us have an unhealthy relationship with food tied in with feelings of self-hatred and low self-esteem. This can be fuelled by promotion of fasting regimens for health and beauty.

So we should consider our MOTIVES very carefully. Religious fasting should not be about losing weight, looking good, punishing ourselves or trying to take some control when things are in turmoil around us ... or giving ourselves an excuse to starve ourselves or to binge afterwards. For SOME people it can be helpful in improving their relationship with God and appreciating His good gifts but fasting from food is NOT essential for this. If fasting from food is potentially dangerous for you, particularly if you are aware of some complex emotional struggles associated with your eating habits, be very careful & consider other forms of self-denial instead.

Please DO NOT encourage children or young people to fast from food – you are putting them in danger.

SHORT TERM RISKS

It is important to look at the physical considerations as well as the psychological ones. Glucose which is a sugar that provides fuel for our bodies comes from the food we eat. Between meals, the body has ways of releasing glucose from its stores to keep the energy levels up, so most healthy people can cope with missing a meal as they just feel hungry but, if something interferes with the body's systems or the demand for glucose is too great, there can be symptoms of:

- Shaking
- Sweating
- dizziness
- poor concentration
- blurred vision
- headache
- tiredness
- irritability (being "hangry")
- in extreme cases, loss of consciousness and seizures.

Consider if fasting may affect your SAFE FUNCTIONING if you are very physically active or doing activities that require good concentration- eg working, driving, childcare - you should maybe confine any fasting to times when you don't have any such responsibilities or can be less active or, if that is not an option, fasting from food is probably not right for you at the moment.

USEFUL LINKS for advice and support:

NHS.UK website- search under “Eating Disorders”

BEAT- the Eating Disorders Charity- you can call on 0808 8010677 (adult helpline) or 0808 801 0711(youth helpline) or visit their website www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk

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