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Note: Here are some extracts from an article published in "Readers' Digest" (March, 1968).

Modern medical science is turning to this ancient practice and finding that when properly supervised it is safe, painless and effective.

By Blake Clark

When he left school, Gerald Ball stood six foot three and weighed 16 stone 12 lb. At college, playing football and eating at the training table, where no second helpings were permitted, he kept his weight at 16 stone 11 lb. But ten years later he weighed 21 stone 6 lb., and in another ten years, although he had tried various reducing schemes, 26 stone. "When I see food I have no will power," he said. He knew he had to do something. But what?

At this point, in March, I960, Ball entered Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia for one more try. There Dr. Garfield Duncan and his associates were taking what seemed, drastic measures for overweight sufferers: total deprivation of food for ten days.

For ten days Ball got nothing but water, tea, coffee and vitamins. He was hungry for the first two days. Then his craving disappeared; he lost all appetite for food. He felt better than he had since he was at college. In ten days he lost 25 pounds. Since then, in 27 months, Ball has undergone three more fasts at the hospital and periodic two-day abstentions on his own. He has lost 6 stone 9 lb., almost a pound a week.

Dr. Duncan is a specialist in the control of diabetes. He has been interested in overweight for many years. As editor of the journal Metabolism, he received an article three years ago from a Dr. Walter Bloom, who had used fasting as a preliminary treatment for nine overweight patients. What caught Dr. Duncan's attention was Dr. Bloom's observation that his fasters did not mind the deprivation. Dr. Duncan decided to give fasting a try.

Selecting patients for the experiment, Dr. Duncan took only those who had failed to reduce by all the

usual methods. These people had been put on 500 to 1,500 calories diets — which they had not kept up. All had taken drugs to reduce appetite (the drugs were effective in most cases for only two or three days, then lost effect). Dr. Duncan insisted that they enter hospital, where they could be carefully observed. He gave them poly-vitamins in therapeutic amounts. They stayed in hospital from five to 14 days. They were weighed each day, and had urine and blood tests.

Results were dramatic. People on low-calorie diets often go for ten days or mere with little or no difference on the scales, because their body had retained water. But on a total fast, the water-retaining mechanism apparently does not work, and the faster sees his improvement registered on the scales immediately. Loss of a pound and a half to two pounds a day at first is usual. This exceeds what would be expected on the basis of caloric expenditure.

Added to this gratifying visualization of fat literally pouring off by the pound is the fact that it is coming off without causing most of the patients hunger pangs. One man said, "After that first period ---- which for most people lasts only a day — you are all right." Said another, "When you are fasting, you are a little like a bear hibernating. You can talk and walk about, but you generally spend most of the time resting." (Without food you tire easily.)

Why don't you get hungry? Dr. Duncan discovered the answer to this question, and thereby made a significant contribution to the study of weight: hunger is lessened by the production of ketones, a kind of mild acidosis, in the faster's blood-stream. Blood -serum tests of patients showed that for the first 24 to 48 hours there was no significant ketone level ---- and the faster was hungry. When the tests showed an elevation in the ketone concentration in the blood, the food craving diminished. The doctor can tell whether a person has broken, his fast simply by taking a blood-serum test for the ketones.

Many people wished to stay on the fast even after 14 days, but Dr. Duncan wanted to be sure there were no unexpected ill-effects. He sent them home on 900 to 1,500 calorie diets which usually exceeded their desire for food for several days. They did not continue to lose weight, however; in fact, many gained a little. As appetites increased, the calorie intake increased as well. This gain, Dr. Duncan and his associates found, could be corrected, by one or two-day fasts at appropriate intervals at the patient's home.

Fasting for other than weight reduction purposes is a time-honoured practice. The Old and New Testaments mention it 74 times. Christ fasted 40 days and 4–0 nights. In Islam there is the universally observed 30–day, sunup-to-sundown fast of Ramadhan, and Buddhists find fasting appropriate to their way of contemplation and asceticism.

The most renowned faster of modern times was Mahatma Gandhi, who in his passive resistance to British rule in India engaged in 15 fasts, three of them lasting 21 days. Usually his only sustenance was hot water, sometimes with lime juice. Although he grew so weak at times that he could not lift a glass, he remained mentally alert, and there is no evidence that he suffered any lasting ill effects.

Perhaps the most carefully observed forbearance from eating was that of A. Levanzin, a lawyer and publisher in Malta, who believed that fasting had cured him, his wife and their two children of serious illnesses. In 1912 he went to the Carnegie Institution in Boston and submitted himself to a 31 day study. Levanzin, who was five feet seven inches tall and weighed 9 stone 8 lb., lived under closest scrutiny day and night, existing on nothing but distilled water. A retinue of specialists made daily tests and observations of his physical condition, his subjective impressions and mental attitude.

As he himself had predicted, Levanzin had no sensation of hunger, and no desire for food. He experienced no abdominal pain or discomfort. On the 11th day he was conscious of muscular fatigue, but on the 14th day he ran down a flight of stairs without difficulty. His memory, tested daily, was as good at the end as at the beginning.

A year later, to see whether he had suffered in any way from his long self-denial, Levanzin was put through the same tests. He did as well or better on nearly all of them. Said his examiners, "It is an indisputable fact that, according to the tests, there was no lasting evil effect of the fast, either upon muscular strength or mental activity."

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