

The Primal Blueprint Podcast – Episode #3: Intermittent Fasting with Mark Sisson

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Brad Kearns: Hi, Brad Kearns back here in the Primal Blueprint Malibu Studio. For another Mark Sisson podcast. Thanks for coming, Mark.

Mark Sisson: Always a pleasure.

Brad Kearns: How about we talk about where you stand right now with the burgeoning primal/paleo movement is so big right now, it has sort of branched out into, I guess you'd call them, various factions, sometimes arguing particulars in the details now that they got the basis down. Let's talk about some of your dietary practices and where you stand on the various hot button topics.

Mark Sisson: [00:00:33] Well, I am open to all manner of eating styles. That is the basic premise in underlying the foundation of paleo and primal. It is this sort of fractal eating and the concept of there is no particular time we should be eating or no particular schedule of how we should be eating. Having said that, I have my own schedule which is currently on a compressed eating window. Typically I eat between 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. and that means I will have a reasonably good size lunch, probably a snack in the afternoon, typically macadamia nuts or something like that. Then I will have an enjoyable evening meal, typically red meat or fish, with grilled vegetables, glass of wine.

Then I don't eat again until 1:00 the next day. Now I do have a cup of coffee. I don't do bullet proof coffee. I do regular coffee, black coffee, with a little bit of cream. I like to chew my calories and the coffee, in my taste, a little bit of ergogenic aid but mostly I enjoy the taste of coffee and to have a cup of something while I am enjoying the paper in the morning. I can give you the argument that coffee does help to mobilize free fatty acids so that on my way to the gym two hours later, I am already in a full fat-burning mode. But I think that I am in that fat-burning mode anyway just because that's how I train my body so I wake up in the morning, I am not hungry for breakfast. Now people say breakfast is the most important meal of the day. If you are wickedly starving then probably it is the more important meal of the day. But a morning meal for me, I have zero interest in it. I never liked breakfast. I always sort of had to force myself to eat breakfast. I am good at burning fat so I wake up in full energy mode and when I go to the gym typically at 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning, or go for a hike, or go for a paddle, I do so fasting. And my strategy is to work out as hard as I can fasted, and then finish the workout and not eat for another hour or two afterwards.

[00:02:54]The idea there is that you can take two different pathways you can take post workout. The old pathway which I ascribed to for 20 years was when you finish doing a hard workout, you burned out all of those glycogens, you have a 45 minutes window of opportunity in which you can resynthesize glycogen most efficiently. So you would slam down 50 or 100 grams of carbohydrates after a workout. That would then prepare you to do a hard workout the next day. Well, the first thing that I adjusted in my schedule is I don't workout hard every day. So I don't need to replenish glycogen on a daily basis. I use my low carb eating strategy and sometime ketogenic eating strategy to allow glycogen to replenish itself just normally through gluconeogenesis and through other metabolic windows of opportunities that I saw for myself. So again, two choices when you finish the workout. One is to replenish glycogens so you can go hard the next day and go glycolytic the next day. If you are sugar burning, you have to do that. The other choice which is almost diametrically opposed to that is to say okay I used the hard workout, particularly doing weights, to increase human growth hormones and testosterone pulses. So I want to maximize that because that's why I workout so hard

and my consuming a high calorie, particularly a high carbohydrate beverage after my workout, raises the insulin and insulin blunts human growth hormone and testosterone release. So you have a choice here. Do I want to replenish glycogen reserves so I can work hard tomorrow, or do I want to maximize my workout I just did today by building muscle and not have to think about, oh, my God! I have to get up and do this tomorrow as well? That's sort of the two choices. As an endurance athlete I used to always have to replenish glycogen. I always had it hanging over my head that now I have produced glycogen so now I have to train hard again tomorrow. Those days are long gone and I am not interested in that anymore. I am interested in how can I be long, lean, strong, fit, happy, healthy, productive, all those things I want, with the least amount of hard work and discipline and sacrifice. In other words, what are the acts that I can do to achieve a healthy body composition, to be able to be strong, and to be able to play whatever sports I want to play at my best possible level and not get injured?

Brad Kearns: [00:05:25]Some of the incidental benefits of that are when you are cutting back on your carbohydrate consumption and not promoting inflammation as much with these workouts because you have more efficient fuel cells.

Mark Sisson: There are so many benefits to this style of eating and particularly as an athlete or someone who is training. I don't consider myself an athlete any more but I sort of wtrain. When I play ultimate Frisbee, I consider myself an athlete or when I am out paddling hard for two hours. I guess you'd call me an athlete. But, you are right. One of the sides benefits is by cutting back on these pro-inflammatory foods, many of which were part of the standard carbo-loading dietary program, it's high in carbs and high in whole grains and other pre-inflammatory food groups. When you cut those out, the inflammation tends to subside. You kind of recover from workouts a little bit easier. You don't have the delayed onset of muscle soreness and there are a lot of those benefits. Beyond those benefits, for me I am able to burn stored body fat just as a matter of living.

[00:06:37]When you become good at burning stored body fat, and when you start engaging in this type of intermittent fasting, what I would call depressed eating window,

one of the things that happens is when your body, which has become so good at burning fat, now doesn't even know whether the 500 calories that you just burned came off a plate of scrambled eggs with bacon or whether it came off your hips, or your butt, or your thighs, or your stomach. So that's a beautiful thing about this style of eating and this ability to be good at accessing stored body fat. Another thing that happens which I found perhaps most fascinating is that hunger regulates. The appetite regulates itself. I don't get the cravings that I once used to get. So even if I have gone 18 hours without eating any food, I am not ravenous. I am not shoveling forkfuls of food down my gullet just because I haven't eaten for so long. I am very comfortable having a nice meal, pushing the plate away when I am not longer hungry for the next bite. Now with this skill, and a lot of people are doing intermittent fasting now on a planned regular basis. Some people I know will say take one day a week and they won't eat from dinner the one night until dinner the next night, or even breakfast the next day (36 hours.) And they do that again as part of the longevity strategy. Because on one hand they are also good at burning body fat so there is a period of time there are 1600 calories that are coming off the stored body fat rather than coming from an exogenous supply of food. But the only thing that happens when you go that long without eating is that it has been proven that there's a repair and restoration that takes place at a cellular level so that when the genes get a sense that there is not going to be any food around producing glucose for a period of time, rather than going in to the period of surplus where the cells say "Hey, there's plenty of food for everybody. Let's just divide, procreate, make more of us." They tend to retrench. They come back and say "There is not enough resources for this one cell, let alone, if I divide and become two cells. Why don't I take a look at some of the damaged proteins, or damaged fats that are residing inside the cell and why don't I consume those?" There is a consumption of damaged proteins and fats. There is a repair of certain elements of DNA or genetic repair takes place that could be considered an anti-aging strategy for a lot of people. That's why a lot of people will choose to do intermittent fasting.

Brad Kearns: [00:09:26] So, it sounds as if there could be a balance point here where hey I want to get bigger, stronger, faster, fitter. I want to recover from my workouts and do one two days later, because Mark says don't do one the next day. But you have to eat

and get good quality food for that, however, you also have these benefits on the other side of getting good at fasting. Is there a way to discover that optimal balance point for the individual?

Mark Sisson: Well, the way you discover the optimal balance point, is by experimenting, where you say, okay I think I am good at burning fat, however, you skip a meal once in a while and see if it effects me. And if you can skip a meal and it doesn't effect you. You don't get light-headed or you don't feel cranky or moody or feel like taking a nap. For me it was the revelation that I would look up from writing, having been on a writing jag, because I had been writing for hours and hours, I would look up and say oh, my goodness, it is two o'clock in the afternoon and I hadn't eaten all day. How come I didn't notice? I was just so busy doing my work and I was so focused that my brain was working fine. There is that initial stage to try it out. Skip a meal here or there and see if there are no ill effects, then you are probably becoming good at burning fats. The next strategy would be to ask do I need breakfast when getting up in the morning? Is that something I would be willing to forego for a couple of hours and see what happens there. All of things happen through trial and error and some people simply cannot skip a meal. For those people I say, don't force yourself. Don't skip a meal. But If you have become good at burning fat and you embrace this kind of strategy then that's where the experiment of one comes in to play. And that's where some people say I think I'll see what happens if I go from lunch today until breakfast tomorrow morning and see if I can skip eating a meal. Over time you get good at it and you realize your are not going to die.

You realize that unlike 10,000 years ago, there is food at your beck and call whenever you feel like you need to. In the original Primal Blueprint 21-day Total Body Transformation. I said for a lot of people this is going to be difficult to become a fat burning beast. You cut the carbs back. To get rid of the sugars and the grains and the cookies and the crackers and the desserts, all the things that you thought were part of a normal functioning lifestyle, but are not. When you cut back on those, there will be times when your brain says, "Hey, Dude! Where's the sugar?" And to get through that period of time, just surround yourself with the healthy kind of snacks we are talking about like the

jerky, or macadamia nuts, or some form of healthy snacks that take the edge off. Do not force yourself to go hungry. It will happen. At some point your metabolism will kick in. You'll become good at burning fat. You'll decrease your dependency on sugar. Your appetite will regulate itself. Your cravings will decrease and you'll get to the point where you'll become very comfortable with a sort of intuitive eating strategy. For me, if I truly intermittent fast, and depressed eating window, not eating for 18 hours, isn't even what I would do. I wouldn't even call that intermittent fasting. But for me, it is like waking up one morning and say, okay, I have to fly to New York. They're not going to serve any great food on the plane, I am not going to live on peanuts and pretzels. So I'll just be okay with not eating for the next 12 hours. I had dinner the night before. I wake up. I go to the airport. The next meal I have is dinner that evening in New York. You can be damn sure it'll be a rib-eye steak with a bowl of sauteed mushrooms and some broccolini, and a glass of claret.

Brad Kearns: [00:13:11] So you possibly do increase your enjoyment of food when you are not using it for fuel in the gas tank and the carbohydrate paradigm.

Mark Sisson: Yeah. Again I enjoy every bite of food I ever eat. I make sure I do that. I make sure I don't choke down nasty stuff just because it is explained that it is supposed to be good for me. There some foods that on the primal list of approved foods that I won't eat. But that's fine. I make sure that I eat tasty, healthy meals all the time. And I enjoy every bite.

Brad Kearns: It sounds like it could be a good weight loss strategy to just transition over to the enjoyment mentality rather than the calorie counting or balancing calories in and calories out.

Mark Sisson: Yeah, it is. Let's be clear that is also a skill that is developed. Some people have a very strong emotional attachment to food for whom food has been the go to balm and salve and shoulder to cry on. There are people who are going to have a very difficult time getting into a mindset where the idea that every bite of food ought to be enjoyed for its sensory input and its taste and its smell and the mouth feel. To the extent

that you finish a plate and push the plate away and say I'm not hungry for the next bite and am okay with leaving a half full plate of food because you are no longer hungry for the next bite. Those are the kind of skills that we ultimately develop. But you have to get rid of cravings first. You have to get rid of this sugar burning mentality. There are a lot of hurdles that we have to overcome before we can even get to that point where food, just for the sake of enjoyment of food and not because it is an emotional crutch. Not because you crave dinner. Not because you were told you had to finish everything on your plate or you weren't a good little boy or girl. Those are almost what we call Primal 2.0 and Primal 3.0, looking at the emotional attachment.

Brad Kearns: [00:15:27] I remember you were talking with some folks at Primalcon Tahoe specifically about fasting in conjunction with intense exercise. How do I go about this? How do I start it? How do I know how long to wait. I believe you said, "When you are hungry after a workout, you can eat. It might be right away. It might be three hours."

Mark Sisson: There is not a lot of magic to that. Back to something I said earlier about post-workout meals and your intention. If your intention is to replenish, why begin it? If you're starving after a hard workout, then go ahead and eat. If you are not hungry after a workout, there is no particular reason to eat. The bottom line is there is not scientific compelling reason that you must go consume something if you are not hungry, or else you'll go in to the cannibal mode and start ripping through your precious muscle tissue. That's just not going to happen. Your body is pretty good with its cues and clues. If you're not hungry after a workout, you don't need to eat.

Brad Kearns: [00:16:39] So if you are stuck in the carb paradigm, and the chronic exercise paradigm, you are probably going to notice that you are hungry when you wake up. You are hungry when after workouts. You are hungry all the time.

Mark Sisson: Yes, because your brain has depended so much on glucose and you can only hold so much glucose in your body. It's not much; only about 100 grams. If you are really intense sugar burner and you are going through that by virtue of having a tough

physical labor job or training hard. Unless you become burning fat, you are just going to rip through that carbohydrate, that glycogen reserve every couple of hours. Which is why the old mantra among trainers for the last two decades. Eat 5 or 6 small meals a day, 2 to 3 hours apiece: a little bit of protein, a little bit of carbohydrates at each meal. That was intended to keep your blood sugar up and to spare your muscle tissue from being cannibalized. And that is what happens if you are a sugar burner. You will encounter that same set of metabolic circumstances. But when you become good at burning fat, all of that changes. Your go-to fall back position is always the body fat. I have been told that I have pretty low body fat. But, you know what? I still have enough body fat to probably walk 300 miles. So the human body is pretty remarkable in its capacity to store and to access fat and fuel.

Brad Kearns: So I guess the starting point is that 21-day transformation of restricting carb intake to become a fat burning beast and then you open yourself to these possibilities like your compressed eating window or the fasting in conjunction with intense exercise.

Mark Sisson: Or carb refeed or what other experiment you want to undertake. But you still have to go through that 21-day transition, I say, in order to really get a good starting point from which to experiment further.

Brad Kearns: Thanks for being here, Mark and thanks for listening to Mark Sisson. We'll talk to you next time. Have a great day.