Major clinical evidence of calorie restriction and intermittent fasting on skin health: a systematic review

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Abstract

Introduction: Combined skin diseases represent the fourth leading cause of non-fatal disability worldwide. In 2013, it was estimated that skin diseases represented almost 2.0% of the total global burden of disease. Different fasting models have been studied in an attempt to understand the effect of fasting on skin structure and function. Objective: It was to present the main scientific evidence of the effects of calorie restrictions and intermittent fasting on skin health.

Methods: The PRISMA Platform systematic review rules were followed. The search was carried out from July to September 2023 in the Scopus, PubMed, Science Direct, Scielo, and Google Scholar databases. The quality of the studies was based on the GRADE instrument and the risk of bias was analyzed according to the Cochrane instrument. Results and Conclusion: A total of 119 articles were found, and 26 articles were evaluated in full, and 23 were included and developed in the present systematic review study. Considering the Cochrane tool for risk of bias, the overall assessment resulted in 22 studies with a high risk of bias and 26 studies that did not meet GRADE and AMSTAR-2. Most studies showed homogeneity in their results, with $X^2=64.7\%>50\%$. It was concluded that although calorie restriction is the most effective intervention to prolong the life of organisms and prevent age-related diseases, its effects on aging and skin diseases can be significant. Dietary lifestyles can affect epithelial lineages such as the skin and intestine. The impact of Ramadan fasting on skin health can be compared with the effect of other types of fasting, including periodic dieting, calorie restriction, dietary restriction, dietary manipulation, and intermittent, short-term, and
prolonged fasting. However, despite the scarcity of studies on the topic, no serious health risks have been reported and, therefore, patients who wish to fast should be warned about the importance of continuing their treatment and the administration of transdermal/topical medications.

**Keywords:** Skin. Skin health. Calorie restriction. Intermittent fasting.

**Introduction**

Combined skin diseases represent the fourth leading cause of non-fatal disability worldwide [1]. In 2013, it was estimated that skin diseases accounted for almost 2.0% of the total global burden of disease [1,2]. It is known that skin problems result from the interaction between several factors, including genetic components, internal diseases, immunological susceptibility, and factors such as infections, stress, lifestyle, diet, or exposure to ultraviolet radiation [3-7].

In this context, different fasting models have been studied in an attempt to understand the effect of fasting on skin structure and function, including modified alternate-day fasting regimens, periodic fasting mimicking diets, short-term fasting, food restriction, caloric restriction or caloric or energetic or energy balance, or prolonged fasting, among others [8-13].

One of the skin's main functions is to provide a permeability barrier to protect against excessive water loss. Extracellular lipids formed mainly by ceramides, cholesterol, and fatty acids are the fundamental components of this barrier. The synthesis of cholesterol necessary for barrier formation occurs in the epidermis [14-16].

In this sense, a study that evaluated the impact of calorie restriction on side effects associated with topical treatment with retinoids observed that there was a significant reduction in retinoid-induced skin irritation without interfering with the beneficial effects of the medication. The resulting mitigation of adverse events associated with fasting has been attributed to two factors, the positive effect of caloric restriction on local antioxidant levels and its inhibitory effect on the transcription of matrix metalloproteinase genes involved in tissue destruction [16].

Therefore, the present study developed a systematic review to present the main scientific evidence on the effects of calorie restrictions and intermittent fasting on skin health.

**Methods**

**Study Design**


**Data Sources and Research Strategy**

The literary search process was carried out from July to September 2023 and was developed based on Scopus, PubMed, Lilacs, Ebsco, Scielo, and Google Scholar, covering scientific articles from various eras to the present. The descriptors (MeSH Terms) were used: “Skin. Skin health. Calorie restriction. Intermittent fasting”, and using the Boolean "and" between MeSH terms and "or" between historical discoveries.

**Study Quality and Risk of Bias**

Quality was classified as high, moderate, low, or very low in terms of risk of bias, clarity of comparisons, precision, and consistency of analyses. The most evident emphasis was on systematic review articles or meta-analyses of randomized clinical trials, followed by randomized clinical trials. The low quality of evidence was attributed to case reports, editorials, and brief communications, according to the GRADE instrument. The risk of bias was analyzed according to the Cochrane instrument by analyzing the Funnel Plot graph (Sample size versus Effect size), using the Cohen test (d).

**Results and discussion**

**Summary of Findings**

A total of 119 articles were found that were subjected to eligibility analysis, with 23 final studies being selected to compose the results of this systematic review. The studies listed were of medium to high quality (Figure 1), considering the level of scientific evidence of studies such as meta-analysis, consensus, randomized clinical, prospective, and observational. The biases did not compromise the scientific basis of the studies. According to the GRADE instrument, most studies showed homogeneity in their results, with $X^2=64.7%>50%$. Considering the Cochrane tool for risk of bias, the overall assessment resulted in 22 studies with a high risk of bias and 26 studies that did not meet GRADE and AMSTAR-2.

Figure 1. Flowchart showing the article selection process.
Major Clinical Results

As we age, skin becomes more fragile and vulnerable to damage, which can contribute to age-related illnesses and even death. Although calorie restriction is the most effective intervention to prolong the life of organisms and prevent age-related diseases, its effects on aging and skin diseases can be significant. Calorie restriction can structurally and functionally affect most of the skin. The anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, stem cell maintenance, and metabolic activities of calorie restriction contribute to its beneficial effects on the skin. Calorie restriction mimetics, including resveratrol, metformin, rapamycin, and peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor agonists, show similar prevention to calorie restriction against skin aging [17].

The authors Grine et al. (2022) [18] analyzed the effects of intermittent fasting on the skin, gut, and metabolic health in patients with psoriasis. A 2-arm open-label randomized controlled pilot study was performed on 24 patients with psoriasis. The evolution of different markers, such as psoriasis severity, permeability, and inflammation, was mapped in response to intermittent fasting compared to a regular diet. Dietary lifestyles can affect epithelial lineages such as the skin and intestine [18].

Furthermore, the authors Bragazzi et al. (2021) [19] evaluated the effect of circadian intermittent fasting (CIF) on the daily management of dermatological diseases through a multicenter prospective observational study. A total of 72 patients with different dermatoses volunteered to participate in the study. They had a mean age of 40.38 ± 12.46 years (median 41.0 years), and 25 subjects were male (34.7% of the entire sample). The average weight change was 0 kg. The overall CIF effect size was -0.58 ([95% CI -0.83 to -0.33], p< 0.0001, medium effect size). As no weight loss occurred in the present investigation, it can be deduced that the impact of fasting in terms of improvements in clinical symptoms could be due to disruption of the human biological clock.

One study investigated the effect of Ramadan fasting on arousal and sustained attention. The skin conductance level of the fasting group was not different from the nonfasting group. In the nonfasting group, the amplitude of the skin conductance response to an auditory stimulus was greater and the onset latency of the skin conductance response was shorter than in the fasting group. The fasting group had a lower total number of marked targets, but a greater total number of missed targets and time for the subject to complete the test than the non-fasting group. Ramadan fasting did not change arousal, but reaction time to an auditory stimulus increased during Ramadan intermittent fasting. Both reaction amplitude and sustained attention also decreased in the fasting condition [20].

Furthermore, the authors Couto et al. (2018) [21] observed the transcriptional response to fasting in a
A large cross-sectional study of adipose and skin tissue from healthy volunteers (N=625). It was identified 367 genes in adipose tissue and 79 in skin whose expression levels were associated with fasting hours conditionally independent of time of day and season, with 19 genes common to both tissues. Among these genes, 38 were replicated in humans. Fasting-responsive genes were enriched for regulation and response to circadian rhythm. It was identified 99 genes in adipose tissue and 54 in the skin whose expression was associated with the time of day. These genes were also enriched for circadian rhythm processes. In genes associated with both exposures, the effect of time of day was stronger and in the opposite direction to that of fasting hours. Therefore, it was identified shared and tissue-specific differences in the transcriptional response to fasting in a large sample of healthy volunteers.

Furthermore, the circadian rhythm and diet have been recognized as potential modulators of the minimum erythematous dose (MED), but their mutual interaction remains poorly studied. Thus, a study evaluated the potential modulation of diet on circadian oscillations in MED. In the first phase, only omnivores were included, specifically 54 patients with PsO and 54 healthy individuals. MED before and after NB-UVB therapy changed significantly between the three different time points (morning, afternoon, and evening) (p <0.001). The effect of time was statistically significant in both groups before and after phototherapy. In the second phase, we recruited 144 patients with PsO (vegan, vegetarian, paleo, ketogenic, circadian intermittent fasting, and omnivorous). The circadian oscillations of MED preserved a significant difference also after depuration and were influenced by the type of diet and time of day (p < 0.001). In particular, vegans had the lowest MED values, while Ramadan fasting had the highest values in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Therefore, the diet, as well as other ongoing therapies, should be reported in the records of patients with psoriasis undergoing NB-UVB and patients with lower MED should be treated preferably in the morning, when MED is highest [22].

Finally, scientific evidence has been accumulating on how skin cells are altered in response to calorie-restricted diets. One of the best-known calorie restriction diets is Ramadan intermittent fasting, which is a radical change in practitioners’ eating plans during one lunar month. Patients with various health problems, including those with different skin diseases, can choose to share this event with their peers and family. However, there are no standardized protocols or guidelines to advise doctors on the appropriate management of their patients' condition during fasting [23].

Conclusion

It was concluded that although calorie restriction is the most effective intervention to prolong the life of organisms and prevent age-related diseases, its effects on aging and skin diseases can be significant. Dietary lifestyles can affect epithelial lineages such as the skin and intestine. The impact of Ramadan fasting on skin health can be compared with the effect of other types of fasting, including periodic dieting, calorie restriction, dietary restriction, dietary manipulation, and intermittent, short-term, and prolonged fasting. However, despite the scarcity of studies on the topic, no serious health risks have been reported and, therefore, patients who wish to fast should be warned about the importance of continuing their treatment and the administration of transdermal/topical medications.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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