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An Annual Diet Craze Is Risky



Patrick M. Markey is an associate professor of psychology at Villanova University and the director of the [Interpersonal Research Laboratory](#). Charlotte N. Markey is an associate professor of psychology at Rutgers University, director of the [Healthy Development Lab](#), and author of the forthcoming book "The Thinking Person's Diet."

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When we were good Catholic schoolchildren, we often gave up candy or chocolate for Lent. Then, Easter would come and so would the chocolate bunnies, marshmallow Peeps and an array of other delicious pastel confections. Feast would follow famine, as the church taught that it should. But as adults we have to wonder: Is it a healthy ritual to give something up only to indulge later?

It turns out that Americans don't need a religious incentive to cycle through fasts and binges. In fact, the news media have recently [devoured a new book](#) called "The Fast Diet," which prescribes five days of feasting and two days of fasting. This is not the first time that an extreme proposition for weight loss has found its way into popular culture.

Thousands of people go on diets at the beginning of each New Year, with almost all failing to adhere to the diet. Then, when the next New Year's Day rolls around, many of these same individuals restart their failed weight-loss efforts. Although such on-again, off-again dieting may seem harmless, [research conducted in our laboratories](#) has found that such cycling is predictive of not only increases in obesity, but also mortality from strokes, heart disease and diabetes.

So, does this mean we shouldn't give up something for Lent? Although fasting or giving up a specific type of food may be good for spiritual health, it may not be good for physical health. Establishing any food as "forbidden fruit" is likely to lead to later indulgence. However, Lenten sacrifice does not have to be about avoiding chocolate bunnies and marshmallow Peeps.

Instead of avoiding a specific type of food for Lent, why not use this solemn religious observance as an opportunity to cultivate a virtue? If you want to modify what you eat as part of Lent, try eating an extra piece of fruit or an additional serving of vegetables each day. Those are healthy habits that may even last for longer than 40 days.

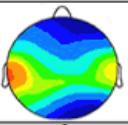
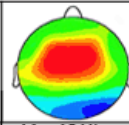
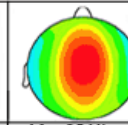
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