

## Is exercise best served on an empty stomach?

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1 **Is exercise best served on an empty stomach?**

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10

11 Short title: Exercise and timing of food intake

12 Keywords: **physical activity**, nutrient timing, metabolism, health

13 **Abstract.**

14 The objective of this review paper is to evaluate the impact of undertaking aerobic exercise in the  
15 overnight-fasted versus fed-state, in the context of optimising the health benefits of regular physical  
16 activity. Conducting a single bout of aerobic exercise in the overnight-fasted versus fed-state can  
17 differentially modulate aspects of metabolism and energy balance behaviours. This includes, but is  
18 not limited to, increased utilisation of fat as a fuel source, improved plasma lipid profiles, enhanced  
19 activation of molecular signalling pathways related to fuel metabolism in skeletal muscle and  
20 adipose tissue, and reductions in energy intake over the course of a day. The impact of a single bout  
21 of overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise on short-term glycaemic control is variable, being  
22 affected by the experimental conditions, the time-frame of measurement and possibly the subject  
23 population studied. The **health** response to undertaking overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise  
24 for a sustained period of time in the form of exercise training is less clear, due to a limited number  
25 of studies. From the extant literature, there is evidence that overnight-fasted exercise in young,  
26 healthy men can enhance training-induced adaptations in skeletal muscle metabolic profile, and  
27 mitigate against the negative consequences of short-term excess energy intake on glucose tolerance  
28 **compared to exercising in the fed-state**. Nonetheless, further long-term studies are required,  
29 particularly in populations at-risk or living with cardio-metabolic disease to elucidate if feeding  
30 status prior to exercise modulates metabolism or energy balance behaviours to an extent that could  
31 impact upon the health or therapeutic benefits of exercise.

## 32 **Introduction.**

33 Regular physical activity and exercise has been associated with a number of health benefits  
34 including reduced risk of developing coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some forms  
35 of cancer. Mechanistically, these effects are mediated through improvements in numerous risk  
36 factors for disease such as blood pressure, lipoprotein profile, inflammation, insulin sensitivity and  
37 weight management <sup>(1)</sup>. Regular physical activity and exercise has also been increasingly recognised  
38 for its therapeutic potential in many clinical contexts such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and  
39 cardiovascular disease <sup>(2; 3)</sup>. Indeed, the concept of exercise as medicine has gained significant  
40 traction in recent years with initiatives such as Exercise is Medicine®  
41 (<http://www.exerciseismedicine.org/>) managed by the American College of Sports Medicine  
42 established to increase the use of exercise programs within primary and other health care settings. A  
43 parallel exists between the salutary effects of exercise and the clinical effectiveness of many other  
44 ‘medications’ in that some individuals display a less than expected therapeutic response. For  
45 example, the HERITAGE Family Study showed that structured regular aerobic exercise training led  
46 to increased insulin sensitivity (determined by intravenous glucose tolerance test) *on average* in  
47 previously sedentary individuals. However, of the entire cohort, 42% of participants displayed no  
48 change or decreased insulin sensitivity <sup>(4)</sup>. A further study reported that 12-weeks structured  
49 aerobic exercise training resulted in weight-loss of ~4kg *on average*, although over 50% of  
50 participants were identified as losing less weight than predicted <sup>(5)</sup>. Whether such observations  
51 reflect true inter-individual variability in responsiveness to exercise training is debated, but the  
52 evidence does indicate that some individuals may not be achieving the full potential benefits of  
53 exercise. **Physical activity relates to any type of movement that requires muscle contraction and  
54 raises energy expenditure, a sub-component of which is structured, volitional exercise.** While  
55 generic physical activity and exercise guidelines are clearly established, identifying strategies to  
56 maximise the therapeutic benefit for all individuals represents an important step in the refinement  
57 and optimisation of public health physical activity recommendations.

58 Sport and exercise scientists have been studying nutrient-exercise interactions for decades in the  
59 search for nutritional strategies that may contribute to improving exercise performance. It is well  
60 known that nutrient intake around exercise can interact with, and modulate, metabolic, hormonal  
61 and molecular responses that may ultimately influence exercise adaptation in endurance-trained  
62 individuals <sup>(6)</sup>. While ensuring a high dietary carbohydrate intake remains critical for optimising  
63 acute endurance exercise performance and recovery, such a strategy has been proposed to blunt  
64 some of the key skeletal muscle adaptive responses to exercise training <sup>(7)</sup>. Accordingly, endurance  
65 athletes are now advised to consider a periodised dietary approach by altering nutrient - and

66 particularly carbohydrate intake - as appropriate to support their training and performance goals <sup>(8)</sup>.  
67 This may include undertaking selected training sessions under conditions of low carbohydrate  
68 availability in order to maximise the adaptive response to exercise, such as performing exercise in  
69 the overnight-fasted versus postprandial state. Much of the nutrient-exercise interaction research has  
70 occurred in the sports performance domain, but there is increasing interest in exploring its potential  
71 translation into optimising exercise responses for health or therapeutic benefit <sup>(9; 10)</sup>. It is well-  
72 known that the effectiveness of some medicines may be reduced by the presence of nutrients in the  
73 gastro-intestinal tract or the direct effects of nutrients on drug metabolism <sup>(11)</sup>. An important  
74 question in light of maximising the therapeutic benefit of exercise for all individuals is whether  
75 exercise, like some medicines, is best taken on an empty stomach? Perhaps the less than expected  
76 response to exercise training observed in some individuals relates to their feeding status around  
77 individual exercise bouts? Accordingly, in this narrative review we evaluate the impact of  
78 undertaking aerobic exercise in the overnight-fasted versus fed-state in the context of optimising the  
79 health or therapeutic benefits of regular physical activity.

#### 80 **Short-term metabolic responses to overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise**

81 Energy production during sustained aerobic exercise performed in the overnight-fasted state (i.e., 8-  
82 12 h) is supported primarily by the oxidation of endogenous fat and carbohydrate stores. Fat  
83 oxidation predominates during low intensity exercise (<45% VO<sub>2</sub>max), both fat and carbohydrate  
84 oxidation increase to support moderate intensity exercise (45-65% VO<sub>2</sub>max), while under most  
85 conditions carbohydrate oxidation predominates at higher exercise intensities (>65% VO<sub>2</sub>max). A  
86 recent systematic review and meta-analysis clearly demonstrated that as compared to performing  
87 exercise in the overnight fasted-state, the consumption of a carbohydrate-containing meal between  
88 0.5-3 h before exercise reduces fat oxidation (and increases carbohydrate oxidation) during exercise  
89 performed for up to 2 h duration at <70% VO<sub>2</sub>max <sup>(12)</sup>. The suppression of fat oxidation during fed-  
90 state exercise occurred regardless of exercise duration, participant sex, BMI, exercise training  
91 status, duration between feeding and exercise or meal carbohydrate content. Plasma non-esterified  
92 fatty acid (NEFA) concentrations did not significantly differ between exercise performed in the fed  
93 versus overnight-fasted state. A clear effect of fed-state exercise on blood glucose and insulin  
94 concentrations points towards increases in glycolytic flux as the dominant regulator of fuel  
95 metabolism in these conditions <sup>(13)</sup>. Further, previous research has established that the increased fat  
96 oxidation observed during exercise in the overnight-fasted state appears to be supported by both  
97 increased plasma long-chain fatty acid oxidation and Type 1 skeletal muscle fibre intramuscular  
98 triacylglycerol (IMTAG) utilisation at least in lean individuals <sup>(13; 14)</sup>. There does not appear to be

99 any modulation of liver fat during exercise regardless of whether this was performed in the  
100 overnight-fasted or fed state <sup>(15)</sup>.

101 Whether the increased fat oxidation when exercise is performed in the overnight-fasted state can  
102 impact upon daily fat oxidation, which would be more representative of long-term potential to alter  
103 fat balance, is of paramount importance. Traditionally, despite exercise increasing fat oxidation  
104 during the exercise bout itself, increases in fat oxidation and reductions in fat balance over a 24 h  
105 period measured using whole room indirect calorimetry have not been observed when studied under  
106 conditions of energy balance <sup>(16)</sup>. This has been attributed to effects of insulin as a consequence of  
107 consuming carbohydrate containing meals suppressing lipid utilisation throughout the day.  
108 However, it is notable that exercise in these studies was not undertaken in the overnight-fasted state.  
109 Iyawama and colleagues demonstrated recently in lean healthy men that 1 h of moderate intensity  
110 exercise results in increased 24 h fat oxidation measured using whole-room indirect calorimetry  
111 when exercise was performed before (i.e., in the overnight-fasted state) breakfast, but not after  
112 lunch or dinner, even when participants remained in overall energy balance <sup>(17)</sup>. The same group  
113 have also shown improved 24 h fat oxidation and fat balance with pre-breakfast exercise in women  
114 <sup>(18)</sup>. Exercise performed in the overnight-fasted state would appear necessary to alter 24 h fat  
115 oxidation. While this area has not received extensive mechanistic investigation, negative  
116 correlations between energy balance or carbohydrate balance with 24 h fat oxidation suggests  
117 transient energy and/or carbohydrate deficits may be driving the response <sup>(17)</sup>.

118 The study of nutrient-exercise interactions in the context of substrate oxidation is important because  
119 links between fat oxidation during exercise and daily fat oxidation have been made <sup>(19)</sup>, as have  
120 associations between daily fat oxidation and obesity risk <sup>(20)</sup>. Of potentially equal importance is  
121 consideration of how timing of food intake around exercise modulates other risk factors for cardio-  
122 metabolic diseases, such as circulating lipid and glucose concentrations. In regards to blood lipid  
123 profiles, a study by Enevoldsen and colleagues is insightful <sup>(21)</sup>. This group determined blood  
124 metabolite and hormone responses across the course of 5.5 h in young healthy men who undertook  
125 exercise either before or after mixed macronutrient meal ingestion. **Over the duration of the study  
126 period, a more favourable response of circulating markers of lipid availability (e.g., lower plasma  
127 triacylglycerol [TAG] and very low density lipoprotein-TAG [VLDL-TAG] concentrations) was  
128 observed when exercise was performed before as compared after to meal ingestion.** A similar result  
129 was observed more recently in a study of overweight men, whereby exercise followed by food  
130 intake but not food intake followed by exercise significantly lowered plasma TAG concentrations as  
131 compared to a non-exercise control trial <sup>(22)</sup>. Collectively, the aforementioned studies imply a

132 potentially beneficial impact of overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise on aspects of body fat  
133 regulation and lipid metabolism at least in the context of single bouts of exercise.

134 The impact of overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise on aspects of glycaemic control has been  
135 subject to considerable recent debate <sup>(23)</sup>. Provision of carbohydrate containing meals increases  
136 blood glucose and insulin concentrations, but when this is followed by exercise glucose uptake into  
137 skeletal muscle is enhanced leading to a lowering effect on blood glucose. This has been argued to  
138 be of particular importance in the context of diabetes, with the commencement of exercise 30-90  
139 min post-prandial suggested to be optimal in accelerating meal-derived glucose disposal thus  
140 avoiding hyperglycaemia but also minimising risk of post-exercise hypoglycaemia <sup>(23)</sup>. This glucose  
141 lowering effect of fed-state exercise in type 2 diabetes does appear to be most pronounced in those  
142 with the highest pre-exercise blood glucose concentrations <sup>(24)</sup>. Taking subsequent meals into  
143 account can present a different picture. For example, feeding prior to exercise in lean, healthy  
144 individuals has been observed to increase the post-exercise postprandial glucose response to mixed  
145 macronutrient ingestion as compared to fasted-state exercise <sup>(25)</sup>. Furthermore, when glycaemic  
146 control was assessed in individuals with prediabetes over the course of a full day after overnight-  
147 fasted or fed-state exercise using continuous glucose monitoring (CGM), interstitial glucose  
148 variability but not total interstitial glucose exposure (area under the curve, AUC) was improved  
149 with fed-state exercise <sup>(26)</sup>. It would seem that the reported influence of a single bout of overnight-  
150 fasted versus fed-state exercise on short-term glycaemic control can be affected by the experimental  
151 conditions (e.g., **when assessed over single versus multiple meals**), the time-frame of measurement  
152 and possibly the populations studied. However, as will be discussed in a later section, it is critically  
153 important to consider the difference between the acute effects of a single exercise bout and the  
154 adaptive response to chronic exercise training resulting from the culmination of those single  
155 exercise bouts.

### 156 **Short-term energy balance behaviour responses to overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise**

157 Exercising in the overnight-fasted versus fed-state will clearly lead to a longer period of energy  
158 deficit, and from an energy balance perspective it is important to understand the extent to which  
159 compensation of this energy deficit may occur during the post-exercise period.

160 This was initially investigated in a study by Gonzalez and colleagues who had 12 young physically  
161 active men undertake 1 h moderate intensity treadmill running exercise performed in the overnight-  
162 fasted state (FAST) or 2 h after breakfast consumption (FED) <sup>(27)</sup>. After exercise, all participants  
163 consumed a standardised mixed-macronutrient drink, followed 90 minutes later by provision of an  
164 *ad libitum* test lunch, allowing for calculation of energy and macronutrient intake. Indirect



165 calorimetry was conducted during the experiment to calculate energy expenditure and substrate  
166 oxidation. This group reported that despite the absence of breakfast in the overnight-fasted exercise,  
167 energy intake during the test lunch was similar when exercise was performed in the fed-state.  
168 Accordingly, energy intake and energy balance across the entire study period was significantly less  
169 when exercise was performed in the overnight-fasted versus fed-state. Interestingly, the lower  
170 energy balance with overnight-fasted exercise was attributable to reduced fat but not carbohydrate  
171 balance, the importance of which are two-fold. Firstly, greater reductions in fat balance may be  
172 more likely to induce favourable effects on body fat loss if sustained over time. Secondly, it is  
173 possible that the maintenance of carbohydrate balance is more important and tightly regulated than  
174 fat balance possibly due to finite carbohydrate storage capacity as has been previously suggested  
175 <sup>(28)</sup>. In support of this assertion, it has been reported that individuals who utilise more carbohydrate  
176 during exercise are more likely to compensate for the energy expended during exercise with greater  
177 post-exercise energy intake <sup>(29)</sup>, and mice overexpressing hepatic *protein targeted to glycogen*  
178 (resulting in increased liver glycogen concentrations under fasted and fed conditions), display  
179 reduced energy intake and increased energy expenditure <sup>(30)</sup>. As such, interventions that minimise  
180 carbohydrate oxidation during exercise (such as overnight-fasted exercise) may serve to limit  
181 subsequent energy intake.

182  
183 More recently, the effects of overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise (i.e., breakfast) on energy  
184 intake was examined over the course of an entire day, which may be more reflective of the potential  
185 for long term impact on energy balance <sup>(31)</sup>. The study by Bachman and colleagues reported that *ad*  
186 *libitum* food (and energy) intake over a 24 h period was lower when exercise was performed prior  
187 to breakfast consumption. Interestingly, reduced energy intake was not simply a function of  
188 breakfast omission but food intake during meals and snacks consumed later in the day suggesting  
189 more prolonged effects of overnight-fasted exercise on regulation of food intake. At this stage, the  
190 involvement of metabolic (e.g., carbohydrate status) and/or modulation of appetite hormone  
191 regulatory mechanisms in explaining this lower energy intake with overnight-fasted exercise has not  
192 been resolved. The possibility of simply having less time in the day to consume food should also  
193 not be excluded, and while speculative, if this is relevant then aspects of the purported benefits of  
194 time-restricted feeding may be worthy for consideration <sup>(32)</sup>. Importantly, the study by Backman and  
195 colleagues did not quantify energy expenditure across the entire study period, thus the overall  
196 impact of the interventions on energy balance was not reported. This may be particularly important,  
197 as in conditions where free-living expenditure has been quantified, omission of breakfast *per se*  
198 (i.e., without exercise intervention) may transiently lower physical activity energy expenditure  
199 which would impact on energy balance <sup>(33)</sup>. These collective studies suggest that short-term studies



200 that encompass and allow for the behavioural responses to overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise  
201 to occur may be particularly useful for understanding the potential for long-term impacts upon  
202 metabolism and health outcomes. However, the impact of altering carbohydrate oxidation on all  
203 components of energy balance (including physical activity) in the post-exercise period currently  
204 remains unknown, as do the mechanisms that link carbohydrate balance to any behavioural  
205 responses in humans.

206

## 207 **Longer-term metabolic and health outcomes in response to overnight-fasted and fed-state** 208 **exercise**

209 It is clear from the previous sections that overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise can modulate  
210 metabolic and behavioural responses to a single bout of exercise. A relevant question is the extent  
211 to which such short-term responses translate into long-term modifications in biomarkers or risk  
212 factors for cardio-metabolic disease. If the feeding status around single exercise bouts is influential  
213 in determining long-term adaptive responses to exercise, then it may in part explain why some  
214 individuals do not always adapt to exercise training as would be predicted. The implication would  
215 be that if all exercise training sessions within a training study were undertaken with standardisation  
216 of pre-exercise nutrition, adaptive responses may be more consistent. However, to our knowledge  
217 there are no studies investigating overnight-fasted versus fed state exercise training on the  
218 consistency or variability of exercise adaptation. Indeed, with a few exceptions described below, the  
219 vast majority of aerobic exercise training intervention studies focus on the exercise component  
220 rather consideration of nutritional control or timing of food intake around exercise bouts.

221 The effects of overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise on total body mass and indices of body  
222 composition have been investigated in training studies conducted under differing states of energy  
223 balance. Under iso-energetic and hypo-energetic conditions, when the state of energy balance is  
224 **matched** between intervention groups, responses of total body mass, fat mass or fat-free mass did  
225 not differ as a function of short-term (i.e., 4-6 weeks) overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise  
226 training<sup>(14; 34; 35; 36)</sup>. While the effects on total body mass may be predictable, the lack of difference  
227 in body fat reduction contrasts what could theoretically be expected based on previously observed  
228 increases in daily fat oxidation and less positive (more negative) fat balance as a result of  
229 conducting overnight-fasted exercise **in acute studies**. One of the aforementioned studies utilised a  
230 high-intensity interval training program<sup>(34)</sup>, which may not be favourable for increasing in fat  
231 oxidation during exercise. As well, in all studies, the duration of training (i.e., **4-6 weeks**) may have  
232 been insufficient to realise the theoretical advantages of overnight-fasted exercise training on body  
233 fat mass. **Previous studies of exercise training *per se* would indicate that at least 12 weeks is**

234 **necessary to induce measurable reductions in body fat** <sup>(37; 38)</sup>. Thus, **to date**, experimental conditions  
235 may not have been optimised to date to conclusively study if body composition can be improved  
236 with regular overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise training in iso- and hypo-energetic  
237 conditions. Indeed it could be that any short-term changes in daily substrate oxidation and storage  
238 are balanced out over periods of days and weeks such that body composition remains unaltered over  
239 the long-term unless there are clear perturbations to long-term energy balance <sup>(39)</sup>.

240 In contrast, a study conducted by Van Proeyen and colleagues indicated that effects of overnight-  
241 fasted exercise training on body composition may be revealed during conditions of hyper-energetic  
242 feeding <sup>(40)</sup>. These researchers subjected three groups of lean, healthy men to 6 weeks of 30%  
243 excess of habitual energy intake in the form a fat-rich (50% dietary energy) diet. Participants either  
244 performed no exercise (Control, CON), overnight-fasted (FAST) or fed-state (FED) exercise four  
245 times per week. In CON and FED body mass significantly increased as compared to pre-diet values  
246 by ~3 and ~1.4 kg, respectively, while no significant changes were observed in FAST. While  
247 interesting, it should be noted that despite apparent within-group differences in body mass gain no  
248 significant between-group differences were observed between FED and FAST. Incidentally, body  
249 fat assessed using skinfold thickness measurements increased in CON, but did not change  
250 significantly in FED or FAST. Overall, there is a paucity of evidence to support a clear influence of  
251 overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise training on body weight and composition, at least when  
252 studied over a short duration of training and in the state of energy balance is matched between  
253 intervention arms. However, as we discuss later in the review, a more fruitful approach in the  
254 context of body weight and composition may be to not clamp energy balance between interventions  
255 and allow natural alterations in energy balance behaviours to occur outside of the specific controlled  
256 fasted or fed-exercise prescription.

257 Exercising in the overnight-fasted versus fed-state has been linked to a number of responses that  
258 could plausibly translate to long-term improvements in lipid and glucose metabolism. Adipose  
259 tissue plays a critical role in the storage of ingested dietary fats with relevance for post-prandial  
260 lipemia and minimising ectopic lipid storage. Indeed, high turnover of adipose tissue lipid stores  
261 has been associated with improved metabolic health <sup>(41; 42)</sup> suggesting that frequent oxidation of  
262 adipose tissue fatty acids increases the ability of adipose tissue to buffer lipid flux. Feeding status  
263 may therefore alter adipose tissue physiology with resultant implications for health. Consistent with  
264 this line of reasoning, a single bout of fed-state exercise blunts the effects typically seen with  
265 overnight-fasted exercise on the expression of genes related to lipid metabolism, insulin sensitivity  
266 and glucose uptake in adipose tissue <sup>(43)</sup>. In a similar manner, fed-state exercise tends to blunt acute  
267 exercise-related responses in skeletal muscle molecular pathways associated with the upregulation

268 of oxidative, lipid and carbohydrate metabolism (e.g., gene expression of FAT/CD36, CPT1, UCP3,  
269 PDK4, GLUT4, AMPK $\alpha$ 2)<sup>(44; 45)</sup>. As well, in young lean men overnight-fasted but not fed-state  
270 exercise increased utilisation of IMTAG in Type 1 skeletal muscle fibres<sup>(14)</sup>; high rates of IMTAG  
271 turnover (i.e., storage and breakdown for NEFA oxidation) have been implicated in the maintenance  
272 of muscle insulin sensitivity<sup>(46)</sup>. Finally, while not unequivocal<sup>(35; 47)</sup>, greater long-term changes in  
273 markers of skeletal muscle training adaptation such as the protein contents of GLUT4, FAT/CD36  
274 and FABP and the maximal activities of the mitochondrial enzymes citrate synthase and  $\beta$ -  
275 hydroxyacyl coenzyme A dehydrogenase have been observed with overnight-fasted exercise  
276 training<sup>(35; 40)</sup>.

277 In general, the above evidence points to the potential for overnight-fasted exercise to promote  
278 greater benefits to metabolic health outcomes than conducting regular exercise in the fed-state,  
279 although the number of investigations in this area is remarkably limited. Summarising the evidence  
280 that is available **to date**, Hansen and colleagues concluded that there does not appear to be clear  
281 impact of short-term fed versus fasted-stated exercise training on overnight-fasted resting blood  
282 markers such as glucose, insulin and NEFA; notably studies have generally been performed in  
283 young lean individuals<sup>(9)</sup>. Only the study by Van Proeyen and colleagues described previously,  
284 which adopted 6 weeks of hyper-energetic fat rich feeding, has addressed the impact of overnight-  
285 fasted versus fed-state exercise training on a dynamic measure of metabolic function<sup>(40)</sup>. These  
286 authors found that the Matsuda Insulin Sensitivity Index (calculated from an oral glucose tolerance  
287 test) was higher in the group that performed overnight-fasted exercise training as compared to the  
288 no exercise control trial. No significant differences were reported between fed-state exercise and no  
289 exercise control, with the implication that fasted-state exercise improves glucose tolerance during a  
290 fat rich diet. The authors rightly acknowledge that body mass gain in the control (and fed-exercise)  
291 trial but not the fasted-exercise trial could contribute to the observed differential responses to  
292 insulin sensitivity. Nonetheless, these data provide promising proof of concept for a role for  
293 overnight-fasted training in enhancing benefits of exercise on glucose tolerance at least under  
294 conditions of excess energy intake, which could have relevance within obesogenic environments.

295 As stated earlier, there is a clinical view that post-prandial exercise is preferable over fasted-state  
296 exercise for the acute control of blood glucose, at least in patients living with type 2 diabetes<sup>(23)</sup>.  
297 However, if an individual performs fasted-state exercise it is not clear if the subsequent post-  
298 prandial rises in blood glucose are pathological. As well, we also highlighted earlier that as  
299 compared to fasted-state exercise, fed-state exercise can result in a worsening of subsequent post-  
300 prandial glucose control<sup>(25)</sup>. Again, the question arises as to whether this is potentially pathological  
301 or simply reflecting short-term adaptive physiology. Our recent work examining post-prandial

302 glucose fluxes after no exercise, exercise performed in the overnight-fasted or fed state would  
303 suggest the latter<sup>(48)</sup>. Specifically, we observed in healthy young men that fed-state exercise  
304 increases glucose appearance rates into the circulation during subsequent glucose ingestion, and this  
305 was explained by increases in the appearance of the ingested glucose. However, this was met with  
306 increases in whole body glucose disposal, such that the increased influx of glucose was  
307 appropriately cleared. Whether this applies in other study populations remains to be determined, but  
308 it does lend support to the notion that the responses of blood glucose to single bouts of exercise  
309 performed in the fed or fasted state are part of normal physiology. What is perhaps more important  
310 is the adaptive stimulus provided by acute bouts of exercise, for example in skeletal muscle, that  
311 when accrued over time results chronic changes in the capacity to manage postprandial excursions  
312 in blood glucose (and lipids). In this respect, the work from Van Proeyen and colleagues showing  
313 that aspects of glucose control may be preferentially affected by consistent exercise training in the  
314 overnight-fasted versus fed-state (under conditions of excess energy intake) is perhaps most  
315 revealing<sup>(40)</sup>, although clearly there is a need to follow-up this work in patients at risk of or living  
316 with disturbances in glucose control such as Type 2 diabetes.

### 317 **Conclusions and future research directions.**

318 There is little doubt that the investigation of how nutrient intake in an around exercise might  
319 modulate the metabolic, molecular and adaptive responses to exercise training is of major current  
320 interest (e.g.,<sup>(9; 10; 23; 49; 50; 51)</sup>). However, there is a need for further research in order to fully  
321 elucidate if overnight-fasted exercise could be a means to optimise the health benefits of physical  
322 activity. For example, the influence of a single bout of overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise on  
323 aspects of lipid metabolism and the molecular signals underpinning training adaptation should be  
324 studied further in populations at-risk for cardio-metabolic disease. Characterising 24 h profiles of  
325 circulating metabolite and hormones related to glucose and lipid metabolism in participant  
326 populations across the health continuum would help to clarify their modulation overnight-fasted or  
327 fed-state exercise. As well, there is a need to characterise the influence of overnight-fasted or fed-  
328 state exercise on short-term energy balance behaviours in a range of study populations, as this could  
329 more adequately reflect responses in ‘real-world’ settings. Generation of these data could provide  
330 clearer insights into which populations and outcome measures may yield greater benefits from long-  
331 term exercise training in overnight-fasted conditions.

332 There is also a need to extend exercise training studies performed in the overnight-fasted state  
333 versus fed state for longer durations (i.e.,  $\geq 12$  weeks) and into population groups with or at risk for  
334 cardio-metabolic disease. In doing this, it would be important to integrate important clinical

335 outcomes such as body mass and composition, glucose tolerance, HBA1C and lipid profiles with  
336 measures of whole-body and tissue specific metabolic function in order to gain further mechanistic  
337 insights (e.g., hepatic, adipose and skeletal muscle adaptation). Given that daily variations in  
338 glycaemic and lipid profiles could impact upon aspects of vascular function (e.g., endothelial  
339 function, microvascular perfusion), this would also be an important area to explore. In conducting  
340 exercise training studies an important consideration is whether or not to match the state of energy  
341 balance between intervention groups. As there appears to be little compensation of energy intake to  
342 acute bouts of overnight-fasted exercise, this approach appears most likely produce more consistent  
343 reductions in energy balance, which over the long-term may provide complementary benefits to  
344 many outcome measures relevant to metabolic health. Mechanistically, it is always appealing to  
345 tease out intervention effects independent from changes in body mass <sup>(52)</sup>. However, if additional  
346 health benefits are to be gained from overnight-fasted versus fed-state exercise it is probably a moot  
347 point as to whether the effects arise through direct or indirect mechanisms related to the  
348 intervention. **Finally, while the focus of the present review was on aerobic exercise, future work**  
349 **investigating the health impact of performing others forms of exercise such as resistance training <sup>(53)</sup>**  
350 **or combined resistance and aerobic training (concurrent exercise) in the overnight-fasted versus fed-**  
351 **state would be worthwhile.**

352 In conclusion, conducting aerobic exercise in the overnight-fasted versus fed-sate can differentially  
353 modulate aspects of metabolism (**Figure 1**) and it is possible that this could influence the overall  
354 adaptive response to exercise training for health benefits. If this is the case, advice on when to  
355 exercise with respect to food intake could be considered for incorporation into physical activity  
356 guidelines in general or for specific sub-populations seeking to optimise the health or therapeutic  
357 benefits of exercise. However, further research, some of which is highlighted in this review, is  
358 needed before we can answer the question as to whether exercise is best served on an empty  
359 stomach.

360

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375 **Conflict of Interest**

376 None.

377

378 **Figure legend.**

379 **Figure 1.** Major metabolic and behavioural factors influenced by aerobic exercise performed in the  
380 overnight-fasted versus fed state. Acute response refers to a single bout of exercise. Chronic  
381 adaptation refers to the culmination of single bouts of exercise over a period of weeks to months as  
382 a result of undertaking an exercise training program. **The figure includes results from studies that**  
383 **used a range of study populations and different experimental designs and as such should be**  
384 **regarded as conceptual rather than definitive. Superscript refers to the appropriate supporting**  
385 **reference.**



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