



IPSA

RAMADAN HEALTH GUIDE

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Ramadan – What is Fasting?

Ramadan falls on the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. Everyday during this month, Muslims abstain from food, drink and other physical needs during the daylight hours (between dawn and dusk). During this month Muslims are to re-evaluate and reflect on their lives – to be forgiving, strengthen ties and to refrain from evil actions, thoughts and words.

Certain people are exempt from fasting for part of the month, or the whole month. Those who:

- Ill or frail
- Pregnant
- Menstruating women
- Breastfeeding mothers
- Travellers



These people are required to make up the number of days missed at a later date or give a fixed sum to charity.

What happens to your body when you're fasting?

The body enters into a fasting state eight hours or so after the last meal when the gut finishes absorption of nutrients from the food.

In the normal state, body glucose is the body's main source of energy. During a fast, glucose is used up first to provide energy. Later in the fast, once the stores of glucose run out, fat becomes the next store source of energy for the body.



Small quantities of glucose are also 'manufactured' in the liver. Only with a prolonged fast (days to weeks) does the body eventually turn to protein for energy - 'starvation'. It is clearly unhealthy. It involves protein being released from the breakdown of muscle, which is why people who starve look very thin and become very weak.



As the Ramadan fast only extends from dawn till dusk, there is ample opportunity to replenish energy stores at Suhoor and Iftaar meals. This provides a progressive, gentle transition from using glucose to fat as the main source of energy, and prevents the breakdown of muscle for protein.



What happens to your body when you're fasting?

The use of fat for energy aids weight loss, preserving the muscles, and in the long run reduces your cholesterol levels. In addition, weight loss results in better control of diabetes and reduces blood pressure.



A detoxification process also seems to occur, as any toxins stored in the body's fat are dissolved and removed from the body.



After a few days of the fast, higher levels of certain hormones appear in the blood (endorphins), resulting in a better level of alertness and an overall feeling of general mental well-being.



Balanced food and fluid intake is important between fasts. The kidney is very efficient at maintaining the body's water and salts, such as sodium and potassium. However, these can be lost through sweating.



To prevent muscle breakdown, meals must contain adequate levels of 'energy food', such as carbohydrates and some fat. Hence, a balanced diet with adequate quantities of nutrients, salts and water is vital.



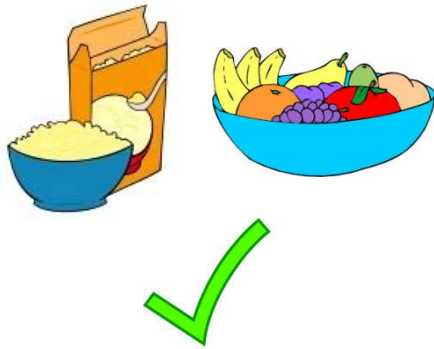
Healthy eating during Ramadan

Overeating can not only harm the body but it is thought also to interfere with a person's spiritual growth during the month. A diet that has less than a normal amount of food but is sufficiently balanced will keep a person healthy and active during the month of Ramadan.

The diet should be simple and not differ too much from one's normal everyday diet. It should contain foods from all the major food groups, as shown below.

Complex carbohydrates are foods that will help release energy slowly during the long hours of fasting. Complex carbohydrates are found in grains and seeds, like barley, wheat, oats, millets, semolina, beans, lentils, wholemeal flour, basmati rice, etc.

Fibre-rich foods are also digested slowly and include bran, cereals, whole wheat, grains and seeds, potatoes with the skin, vegetables such as green beans and almost all fruit, including apricots, prunes, figs, etc.



Foods to avoid are the heavily-processed, fast-burning foods that contain refined carbohydrates in the form of sugar, white flour, etc., as well as, of course, too much fatty food (eg cakes, biscuits, chocolates and sweets, such as Indian Mithai). It may also be worth avoiding the caffeine content in drinks such as tea, coffee and cola. (Caffeine is a diuretic and stimulates faster water loss through urination.)

Healthy eating during Ramadan

Suhoor, the pre-dawn meal, should be a wholesome, moderate meal that is filling and provides enough energy for many hours. It is therefore particularly important to include slowly-digesting foods in the suhoor.

Iftar is the meal which breaks the day's fast. This meal could include dates, following the Prophetic traditions. Dates will provide a refreshing burst of much-needed energy. Fruit juices will also have a similar, revitalising effect. The meal should remain a meal and not become a feast! Try to minimise the rich, special dishes that traditionally celebrate the fast and keep to the advice included in the table.

The most commonly consumed foods by **Prophet Mohammed** (peace be upon him) were milk, dates, lamb/mutton and oats.

Healthy foods mentioned in the **Holy Qur'an** are fruit and vegetables, such as olives, onions, cucumber, figs, dates, grapes as well as pulses such as lentils.

The encouragement of **fish** can be seen in the fact that Islamic law spares fish from any specific slaughter requirements, making it easy to incorporate fish in a meal.

<i>Foods to avoid</i> ✘	<i>Healthy/alternative foods</i> ✔
Deep-fried foods, eg pakoras, samosas, fried dumplings	Whole grains, eg chickpeas (plain, or with potato in yogurt with different Indian spices), samosas baked instead of fried, and boiled dumplings
High-sugar/high-fat foods, eg Indian sweets such as Ghulab Jamun, Rasgulla, Balushahi, Baklava	Milk-based sweets and puddings, eg Rasmalai, Barfee
High-fat cooked foods, eg parathas, oily curries, greasy pastries	Alternate with chapattis made without oil, and baked or grilled meat and chicken. Try to make pastry at home and use a single layer
<i>Cooking methods to avoid</i>	<i>Alternative cooking methods</i>
Deep frying	Shallow frying – usually there is very little difference in taste
Frying	Grilling or baking is healthier and helps retain the taste and original flavour of the food, especially chicken and fish
Curries with excessive oil	Start with measuring the oil used in curry and try to bring the oil content down gradually, eg reducing five tablespoons to four. This is a good way of reducing oil without noticing much difference in the taste. A useful tip is to use more onions and tomatoes in the bulk of the curry

The benefits of fasting

Fasting is not only a physical but also a spiritual exercise that has many lasting benefits.

1. Heightened consciousness of God

Fasting helps you to become less preoccupied with bodily appetites, and gives the heart and mind the freedom to reflect upon deeper spiritual matters, such as your relationship with God and with fellow human beings. It enables a person to develop sustained consciousness of God (Taqwa).



3. Compassion and charity

When fasting, you should think of those in need who may be fasting but have no food at the start or the end of their fast, those whose tiny children are also having to go hungry because of poverty. The Prophet Muhammad described Ramadan as “the month of mercy”. His companions observed: “The Prophet (Muhammad) was the most generous of people, but he would be his most generous during Ramadan ...” (Sahih al-Bukhari)



2. Healthy lifestyle

A fasting person learns restraint, and only responds to hunger and thirst in the heightened level of consciousness and discipline. Through fasting, a person begins to appreciate the value of food.

In the Qur’an “healthy and wholesome food” is described as the best of provisions. Thus fasting helps a person to choose a healthier lifestyle by making small yet lasting changes to their daily diet.



4. Community spirit

During Ramadan, the one who fasts has heightened concerns for the well-being of the community – rich and poor, intellectuals and labourers. Community spirit is promoted as people start fasting and break their fast at the same time, and reflect together through longer prayer and deeper devotions. It is greatly encouraged that families invite each other to break their fast together.



The benefits of fasting

5. A fast without the spirit is empty of blessing.

Abstention for long hours can be very hard physically and spiritually. However, by the end of the long month you should feel cleansed and with a renewed spirit. Ramadan is an ideal time to break bad habits, to reflect on personality and to improve your character.

Those who fast but make no change to their lives except delaying a meal cannot really expect to become any different in their behaviour during or after Ramadan. In many ways, this is a wasted fast, as stressed in a number of sayings of the blessed Prophet: fasting is not merely “abstention from eating and drinking, but also from vain speech and foul language”. (Sahih al-Bukhari). Fasting is, therefore, about much more than just giving up food and drink and hoping to lose a couple of pounds. By fasting, a person reflects, acts and betters |



How to deal with...

Heartburn (indigestion)

The stomach is an acidic environment, designed to digest food and kill bacteria. If too much acid is produced or the valve at the bottom of the gullet is 'faulty', you may experience heartburn.

Fasting usually reduces the amount of acid produced, but thoughts or smell of food make the brain order the stomach to produce more acid. Hence if there is a net increase in acid, heartburn could be a problem during the fast.

Those who are on regular medication for indigestion, such as antacids (eg Gaviscon), antihistamines (eg Zantac) or proton pump inhibitors (eg Losec, Zoton or Nexium) are advised to *continue* taking them, at Suhoor for instance.



Helpful advice:

- Eat moderately and avoid oily, deep-fried or very spicy food.
- Reduce your caffeine intake
- Stop smoking
- Peppermint oil may help reduce belching or colic
- Sleep with your head raised on a few pillows
- Long-term weight loss may also help prevent heartburn.

Poor control of diabetes

Those injecting insulin are advised not to fast, as the potential risk to health – short and long term

If you are controlling your diabetes using tablets, ensure that you visit your GP before Ramadan, to discuss any possible changes to their drug regime which would facilitate a safe fast.



Helpful advice:

- Regularly monitor your blood glucose level.
- If you have a hypoglycaemic attack (a 'hypo' – low blood sugar levels) you must immediately have a sugary drink, or place sugar or a sugar-rich sweet below the tongue.
- Hypo symptoms include feeling dizzy, sweaty and disorientated and can lead to fainting/fits (dangerous)
- Diabetics on long acting medication and/or with further complications, such as angina or heart failure, stroke, retinopathy (eye disease), nephropathy (kidney disease) or neuropathy (nerve disease of feet/hands with numbness/loss of feeling) should seek doctor's advice before starting a fast.

How to deal with...

Headache

Headaches during a fast could commonly be due to dehydration or hunger, inadequate rest, or the absence of addictive substances such as caffeine or nicotine.



Helpful advice:

- Moderate and balanced diet especially not missing Suhoor
- Consuming plenty of fluid e.g. water
- if necessary, taking a dose of painkillers such as paracetamol, may prevent or reduce the risk of developing a disabling headache
- Not exposing yourself to direct sunlight - wear a hat and sunglasses to reduce the effect of glare from the sun
- Relieve any tense muscles with short, gentle massage.
- If you have a history of frequent and/or disabling migraines, aim to gain adequate control with lifestyle and/or medical treatment before Ramadan
- Despite the above measures, if you have a persistent, disabling headache, you should see a doctor.

Dehydration

Dehydration is a common during a fast. The body loses water and salts through breathing, sweat and urine; the quantity of water loss will vary depending on

- the weather
- how much you had to drink before your fast
- the degree of physical exertion
- the ability of the kidneys to retain water and salts.

If you do not adequately rehydrate before a fast, your risk of dehydration is increased. This risk is higher in the elderly and in those taking tablets such as diuretics.



You may experience a general feeling of being unwell, lethargy, muscle cramps, dizziness, disorientation and even collapse/faint

Helpful advice:

- If you are unable to stand up due to dizziness, or you are disorientated, you should urgently rehydrate with regular, moderate quantities of water, ideally with sugar and salt, or Dioralyte or Lucozade.
- If you faint due to dehydration, your legs should be raised above your head by others, and when you awake, you should urgently rehydrate as outlined above.

How to deal with...

Complications of any common chronic diseases

Common diseases such as high blood pressure and asthma are controlled using medication that needs to be taken regularly every day of the year. This is necessary in order to avoid possible complications from the inadequate control of disease, such as a stroke or an asthma attack. A consultation with your doctor should provide an opportunity to discuss any potential options for completing a fast safely, while continuing to control your disease

Stress

Lack of food and water, changes of routine and shorter periods of sleep can all collude to increase stress levels. Hence it is important to address any potential sources of stress in order to minimise harmful effects. This can be helped by not taking on more than you can reasonably handle, not playing sports in the hot sun, controlling your anger in advance and abstaining from smoking.

Constipation

Constipation could be a very irritating problem for someone undertaking a fast. Maintaining good hydration outside the fast, eating healthily, with lots of fruit and vegetables in your diet, increasing the fibre content of your food using bran, and being active all help to keep your bowel motions as regular as would otherwise be expected.

If the problem persists, a short course of bulk laxatives may help.

Obesity

Strange, but true! For the unwary, or those lacking in caution, food consumed during the pre-dawn and dusk meals may lead to some unintended weight gain. Obesity is an epidemic in the making, and has numerous complications in its own right. It is ironic that you are able to become overweight or obese while you are fasting. But if you do not approach the fast with discipline and will, the opportunity to lose weight and become healthier is wasted.

Frequently asked questions...

Chapter 2, verse 184 of the Qur'an:

People who have an illness or medical condition of any kind that makes fasting injurious to their health are exempt from fasting.

To compensate for the missed fasts, they must fast later when they are healthy; if this is not possible due to long-term illness, they must feed the poor. The latter form of compensation is known as *fidyah**.

Q1 Should a person with diabetes fast?

People who have their diabetes under control, either by diet or using tablets, may fast. However, their GP may require them to make changes to their medication in order to help them take tablets outside the times of fasting. Those who need insulin to control their diabetes are advised not to fast.

Q3 Should a person with high or low blood pressure fast?

Those with well-controlled high blood pressure may fast with lifestyle alterations and/or medication. Their GP may require a change to their medication in order to help them take tablets outside the times of fasting. A person with so-called 'low blood pressure' who is otherwise well and healthy may fast. An adequate intake of fluid and salts in the diet is advised.

Q2 I get severe migraines when I skip meals and they get worse when I fast. Should I fast at all?

Those with uncontrolled migraines are advised not to fast. However, adequate control of migraines is possible for most people with medication and alterations to lifestyle, and hence such avenues should be exhausted prior to deciding not to fast. Please see your GP for further advice on better control of your migraines.

Q4 Is fasting harmful when a woman is expecting a baby? Is it compulsory to fast while pregnant?

It is not compulsory to fast while pregnant, but the woman will either need to make up those fasts later or, if unable to do this, should perform *fidyah**. There is some medical evidence to show that fasting in pregnancy is *not* advisable. If a pregnant woman feels strong and healthy enough to fast, especially during the early part of the pregnancy, she may do so. If she does not feel well enough to fast, Islamic law gives her clear permission not to fast, and to make up the missed fasts later.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q5 Is Ramadan a good time to quit smoking?

Yes. Smoking is wasteful and seriously injurious to health. Allah has entrusted us with a healthy body, and it is a violation to knowingly and willingly harm it. Ramadan provides a great opportunity to amend many bad habits, and smoking is very definitely one of them.

Q6 From what age can children fast safely?

Children are required to fast from the age of puberty, and this is not harmful. Fasting prior to this age is tolerated differently depending on the children's general health, nutrition and attitude. Fasting prior to the age of seven or eight years is not advisable, although it is a good idea to ake young children aware of the practice of fasting in the community around them, and to give them 'taste' of asting, eg for a few hours at a time. It is narrated that the companions would distract young children with toys if they were hungry near the time of iftar, so that they would become accustomed to joining the rest of the community in fasting at sunset, rather than eating just before sunset, during Ramadan. (Sahih al-Bukhari)

Q8 Can I swim during fasting?

Yes, but do not drink the water. Having a bath or shower or swimming has no effect on the fast. Clearly, no water should be swallowed during any of these activities, for that would break the fast.

Q7 Can I use an asthma puffer during Ramadan?

Muslim jurists differ on this issue. Some leading jurists argue that using an asthma inhaler is not classified as eating or drinking, and is therefore permissible during fasting. Others argue that because the inhaler provides small amounts of liquid medicine to the lungs, it breaks the fast. Perhaps the former view is stronger, since the inhaler assists with breathing and helps the person to fast, which means abstaining from food and drink.

According to the first view, asthmatics may fast and use their inhalers whenever required during fasting.

According to the second view, asthmatics with poor control of their disease are advised not to fast until good control is achieved. Others may alter their inhalers to those of a longer-acting variety so that fasting may be feasible. Please see your GP for further advice.

Frequently asked questions...

Q9 Can a person fast if they are getting a blood transfusion in hospital?

No. A person receiving a blood transfusion is advised not to fast on medical grounds. They may fast on the days when no transfusions are required.

Q10 I am on regular medication. Can I still fast?

- If such medication needs to be taken during the time of fasting, you should not fast.
- If this medication is required as treatment for a short illness, you can compensate for missed fasts by fasting on other days when you are well.
- If medication is required on a long-term basis as part of an ongoing illness or condition such as high blood pressure or diabetes, then discuss with your GP whether to change your medication to enable you to take it outside the time of the fast.
- If your disease is unstable or poorly controlled, you are advised not to fast.
- Those who are unable to compensate later for missed fasts, due to the long-term use of medication, are advised to do fidyah*.

Q11 Does a breastfeeding woman have to fast?

No. Islamic law exempts a breastfeeding mother from fasting. Missed fasts will need to be compensated for by fasting or fidyah* once breastfeeding has ceased.

Q12 Can a Muslim patient take tablets, injections, inhalers or patches while fasting?

Taking tablets invalidates the fast. However, injections, inhalers, patches, ear and eye drops, etc that are not comparable to food and drink do not break the fast, although it is advisable to avoid these if possible due to the difference of opinion among Muslim jurists on these issues. Islamic law exempts the sick from fasting. Please see the answer to Q10 for further details.

*Fidyah: a method of compensation in Islam for a missed act of worship that must be otherwise fulfilled. If you are unable to fulfil a missed fast, for example due to an ongoing illness, you should feed a hungry person (two meals per day) if you are able to. Please consult an Islamic scholar for further details.