

HEALTHY FASTING DURING RAMADAN

The month of Ramadan is a great opportunity to focus on bringing back a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Through fasting you learn how to manage your eating habits and improve self-discipline.

The information on this fact sheet aims to help you understand the health issues related to fasting, so that you are able to make more informed choices, minimise complications and maximise the benefit of your fast.

IS FASTING HEALTHY?

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, which is stored in the liver and muscles, is the body's main source of energy.

During a fast, this store of 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. Only with a prolonged fast of many days to weeks does the body eventually turn to protein for energy. This is the technical description of what is commonly known as 'starvation', and it is clearly unhealthy.

As the Ramadan fast only extends from dawn until dusk, there is ample opportunity to replenish energy stores at pre-dawn and dusk meals. This provides a progressive and gentle transition from glucose to fat as the main source of energy, thereby preventing the breakdown of muscle for protein.

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.

DON'T SKIP BREAKFAST!

Even though the thought of sleep may be far more appealing than waking up to force down some food, don't skip breakfast. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day and during Ramadan – it's the meal that will sustain you for the next few hours.

QUICK TIPS

- Eat normal sized, nutritious meals at Sahoor and Iftar.
- Avoid foods high in fat, salt and sugar.
- Choose a diet rich in fruit, vegetable, beans, lentils rice and grains.
- Drink plenty of fluids and avoid caffeinated beverages like coffee, tea, energy drinks or cola.
- Break the fast with a healthy snack like dates – a nutritious burst of natural sugar.
- Speak to a health professional before changing medication regimes for Ramadan.
- Avoid excessive exercise during fasting times - if you want to go to the gym, consider doing so after Iftar.

GOOD AND BAD FOODS DURING RAMADAN

During Ramadan you need to put extra effort into including foods from all five food groups to ensure variety and a well-balanced diet. These foods include:

- breads, cereals and other grain products
- fruit and vegetables
- meat, fish and poultry
- milk, cheese and yoghurt
- fats and sugars (these contain very little nutrients and are high in calories and therefore their intake should be limited).

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.

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

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



Foods to avoid are the heavily processed and fast-burning foods that contain refined carbohydrates such as sugar and white flour or fatty food like cakes, biscuits, chocolates and sweets. 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).

Foods to avoid	Healthy/alternative foods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deep-fried foods, eg pakoras, samosas, fried dumplings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whole grains, eg chickpeas (plain, or with potato in yogurt with different Indian spices), samosas baked instead of fried, and boiled dumplings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-sugar/high-fat foods, eg Indian sweets such as Ghulab Jamun, Rasgulla, Balushahi, Baklava 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Milk-based sweets and puddings, eg Rasmalai, Barfee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-fat cooked foods, eg parathas, oily curries, greasy pastries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate with chapattis made without oil, and baked or grilled meat and chicken.
Cooking methods to avoid	Alternative methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deep frying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shallow frying – usually there is very little difference in taste
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grilling or baking is healthier and helps retain the taste and original flavour of the food, especially chicken and fish
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curries with excessive oil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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

WHAT FOODS SHOULD I EAT AT SUHOOR AND IFTAR?

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 like complex carbohydrates. Drink fluids to keep you hydrated during the day and assist with digestion.

Iftar

The meal that breaks the day's fast 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!

WHAT IF I'M UNWELL DURING RAMADAN?

Ramadan fasting is obligatory for the healthy adult but when fasting may significantly affect the health of the fasting individual or when one is genuinely sick, Islam exempts them from fasting. "God intends every facility for you, he does not want to put you into difficulties" (Quran 2:185).

Because taking pills and medications can be seen as breaking the fast, people on regular medicines should discuss this with their doctor or pharmacist. If necessary, it is possible to make up missed fasting days at a later date.

Fasting isn't recommended for pregnant women in their 2nd or 3rd Trimester or children under the age of nine.

SHOULD I EXERCISE DURING RAMADAN?

When we fast, our bodies naturally become less active because of the reduced energy that we are getting from food. Therefore, it is advisable to reduce the level of high impact exercise you perform during Ramadan. Rather than lifting weights at the gym, consider something like Yoga which will place less stress on your body and also allows you to relax and meditate during your exercise – important things during the month of Ramadan.

If you need to work out or train at the gym, consider exercising after you have broken the fast.

SHOULD I SMOKE DURING RAMADAN?

Smoking is considered to void a fast because you take something into your body through your mouth. A principle of Ramadan is purification of the body and tobacco is the greatest contributor to death and disease in the developed world. This makes Ramadan a great time to consider quitting smoking or at least cutting back. Speak to a doctor or pharmacist for more advice or contact Quit on 13 78 48. Nicotine patches will help you cut down or quit and won't void the fast.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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International Student Information and Support

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Ramadan

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