

# Fasting the right way

Ramadan is the holiest time of the year for Muslims; a time for prayer, contemplation and sacrifice. It's a time when Muslims throughout the world fast in order to create empathy with the poor but also to teach patience and self control.



*Where food tastes the way it used to...*



During the month of Ramadan, it is forbidden to eat or drink between dawn and sunset, after which the traditional Iftar meal is eaten to break the fast.

There are two conflicting viewpoints about fasting: some feel the act is unnatural and dangerous, slowing down the metabolism, and even causing long term health problems. Other health professionals feel that fasting can have beneficial effects, both physical and mental. So which is right? Will fasting put you on the fast lane to weight loss, or will it cause more harm than good?

In order to understand the effects of fasting, it is necessary to understand how the body processes food. Food is needed to provide energy for immediate use. This is done by burning carbohydrates. Excess carbohydrates, which cannot be used, are stored up as fat tissue in the muscles and as glycogen in the liver for future use. Insulin, a hormone from the pancreas, lowers blood sugar and diverts it to other forms of energy storage. To be effective, insulin has to be bound to binding sites called receptors. Obese people lack receptors. Therefore, they cannot utilise their insulin and this may lead to glucose intolerance. When a person fasts it lowers blood glucose and insulin level and this causes a breakdown of glycogen from the liver to provide glucose for energy needs and a breakdown of fat from adipose tissue to provide for energy needs.

Fasting for Ramadan is obviously different than total fasting and some studies have shown that fasting during Ramadan can actually have a beneficial effect. To understand why this is so, we need to take a look at the lipostat, a tiny section of the brain that controls body mass. During severe weight loss, the lipostat does not recognise this to be normal, and reprograms the body to gain weight rapidly once the fasting has stopped. Therefore the only way to lose weight permanently is through slow, controlled weight loss. Some analysts believe the lipostat will respond positively to the incremental nature of Ramadan fasting and cause a permanent drop in weight. This however has yet to be proven, and most western doctors would not recommend fasting as a tool to lose weight. Doctor Ryan Penny, a doctor at the Dubai Herbal & Treatment Centre, believes there are a lot of misconceptions about fasting. "Most people think that fasting helps them lose weight. In most cases it leads to both fat as well as muscle loss, and research shows that is not the healthiest and most effective way to lose weight. I think the benefits of fasting at Ramadan are more spiritual than physical."

**6 Muslims are supposed to eat naturally - increasingly that means organic foods. 9**



One doctor and writer who believes fasting is one of the best ways to stay healthy is Dr Elson Haas, an American doctor who has written several books on the subject of fasting. He is adamant that many ailments can be cured by fasting. "Fasting (cleansing, detoxification) is one part of the trilogy of nutrition; balancing and building (toning) are the others. I believe that fasting is the 'missing link' in the Western world's diet. Most people overeat, eat too often and eat a high-protein, high-fat, rich-food, building and congesting a diet more consistently than they need. If we regularly eat a more balanced and well-combined diet, we will have less need for fasting and toning plans, although both would still be required at certain intervals throughout the year.

"In a sense, detoxification is an important corrective and rejuvenative process in our cycle of nutrition. It is a time when we allow our cells and organs to breathe out, become current, and restore themselves. We do not necessarily need to fast to experience some cleansing, however. Minor shifts in the diet such as including more fluids, more raw foods, and fewer congesting foods will allow for better detoxification; for a carnivore, for example, a vegetarian or macrobiotic diet will be cleansing and purifying."

Even fasting's biggest cheerleaders admit that for it to be of benefit, there has to be clearly



*Where food tastes the way it used to...*

## Nils' notes

Every issue, Nils El Accad, CEO of Organic Foods & Café, looks at healthy eating from an organic perspective.

When you reduce the amount of food you eat, the quality of that food becomes even more important. This is why, during Ramadan, it is crucial to eat the right foods. Breaking the fast is an occurrence heavy in religious and spiritual meaning and it is important for your body as well. Making the right choices at iftar will determine how your body responds to fasting, which is, after all, an unnatural act, given that most people do not fast for 11 months of the year,

One of the best ways to ensure you keep on an even keel during Ramadan is to eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Complex carbohydrates are also vital as these are slow acting and will keep you feeling full for longer. This is particularly important at breakfast as the longer you keep the hunger pangs away during the day the better. Wholemeal toast and avocados are rich in complex carbs and far better than sugary cereals, which will give you an initial sugar

high, but leave you crashing and burning soon after. Not a good feeling when you have nine or ten hours of fasting ahead of you.

Another crucial factor is to avoid caffeine in all its forms. Drinking coffee or coke in the morning will set up for a day of lethargy and regular tea should also be avoided. The best choice is green tea -which acts as an antioxidant - or good old water, crucial in the September heat.

When the sun goes down, resist the temptation to stuff your face. Ease into the meal gently, drink plenty of water and chew! Eating two or three small meals during the evening is far better than gorging on one feast. The quality of the food is as important as its quantity. Organic food is perfect for Ramadan as you know its quality is guaranteed and that you are giving your body every chance to perform. Fasting can be a testing time for everyone, don't make it more difficult than it has to be.

And my personal tip? Use this time as a non-muslim to join in and get the benefit of a juice-based cleansing fast. It's something I do regularly.

**6 Organic food is perfect for Ramadan as you know its quality is guaranteed and that you are giving your body every chance to perform. 9**



*Where food tastes the way it used to...*

defined rules. Dr Mohammed Zafar Nomani, Professor of Nutrition at West Virginia University, says these rules are simple yet effective. "Those fasting must drink plenty of water between iftar and sleep to avoid dehydration. It is very important to eat vegetables and fruit at each meal. This is essential in order to get the right type of minerals. One mistake many people make is to eat too much sugary products after the fast. This may result in a short-term energy boost, but in the long run it will leave fasters lethargic." Caffeine should also be avoided, according to Dr Nomani. "Drinks such as coke, coffee or tea will give short-term spikes in energy levels but are not good in the long term as they are diuretics. They should be given up completely about five days before Ramadan, as a sudden decrease in caffeine brings on headaches, mood swings and irritability, not something you want to deal with when you are fasting as well."

Dr Nomani believes, if followed, these rules will enhance the spiritual and physical benefits of fasting. "It is my experience that within the first few days of Ramadan, I begin to feel better even before losing a single pound. I work more and pray more. My physical stamina and mental alertness improve. As I have my own lab in the office, I usually check my chemistry, that is, blood glucose, cholesterol, and triglyceride before the commencement of Ramadan and at its end. I note marked improvement at the end. As I am not overweight, thank God, weight loss is minimal. The few pounds I lose, I regain soon after. Fasting in Ramadan will be a great blessing for the overweight whether with or without mild diabetes. It benefits those also who are given to smoking or nibbling. They can rid themselves of these addictions in this month."

Dr Penny agrees that the right foods are crucial to ensure that fasting has beneficial side effects. "Eating the wrong foods at iftar can lead to serious blood sugar fluctuation. There is a tradition of eating seven dates, but the downside of this is that one is only eating sugar. I would recommend that one eat the dates but combine them with some protein like nuts or vegetables. This helps to reduce blood sugar fluctuations. Other options are portions of complex carbs like brown rice, whole grain crackers, avocado and sweet potatoes. And of course, drinking plenty of water is important." Dr Penny believes what is eaten before the fast is just as important. "In the morning, those fasting should eat a sufficient amount of complex carbohydrates such as brown rice, whole grain crackers, avocado, and drink plenty of water."

## Foods to break the fast with



### Warm water

This is the best way to break the fast as it cleans out your system and gently readjusts your body to eating. Try it with a slice of lemon - the citrus will reawaken your palate.

### Gamet jallab

One of the key things to do after fasting is to rehydrate, particularly in the hot Gulf climate. Lucky then, that one of the iftar staples is Gamet jallab, a mixture of grape extracts, rosewater and sugar, added to ice and pine nuts. Both refreshing and sweet, Gamet jallab has long been a favourite way to break fast.

### Kunafeh

Kunafeh is a dessert made from soft white cheese and baked semolina served with a heavy, sweet syrup. This is high in sugar, which is important to release energy after a day of fasting.

### Probiotic organic yogurt

Probiotic yogurt is one of the best ways to break the fast as it aids indigestion, particularly useful after fasting. It also improves the immune system, reduces the risk of intestinal infection and protects against colon cancer.

### Fruit

Fruit is an essential part of any diet, even more so when fasting. It helps to regulate the digestive system and acts as a natural laxative, very important when fasting as the body does not clean itself out as normal. Fruits such as strawberries and oranges contain important vitamins and antioxidants,

## Fasting for health

Of course, fasting is undertaken not just for religious duty but by many people for its health benefits. Many cultures use fasting as part of a set of shared rituals - the Christian period of Lent before Easter, for example - and various health regimes, notably yoga, stress the importance of fasting to regulate the body.

Some even claim it to be one of the secrets of long life.

The theory goes like this: your body and digestive system have to work constantly. However, as with a break from work or school, they also need a rest from time to time and a period of fasting provides that rest period. It allows your digestive system to recover from all of your eating mistakes - wrong amount of food, wrong diet choices, wrong time of the day. In addition, fasting allows the body to eliminate toxins, which can be flushed from your system with salted lemon water.

As importantly, fasting gives you back time that you can spend in meditation or self-examination. All that time you normally spend shopping and cooking, you can now devote to yourself.

Unlike the Ramadan fast, fasting for health has a different structure. Typical is yogic fasting from sunrise to sunrise, eating and, if strong enough, drinking nothing. You then break your fast with lemon water and some fruits.

Is fasting difficult? Initially you might think so, but good preparation is important. Physically, you prepare by taking enough food and drink the day before; mentally by getting into the right state of mind, with determination that you can and will succeed.

And, once you've done it once, you should make it a general part of your health and diet regime. As many people have found before you, fasting is one of the best ways to maintain physical, mental and spiritual health. Why not try it?

However, a few words of caution. Early side effects of fasting include headaches and prolonged fasting can result in anaemia, low blood sugar and irregular heartbeat so it may be wise to speak to your doctor before embarking on a fast or detox diet. Overall, the best diet is one based on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean sources of protein and unsaturated fats. Add regular exercise and stress reduction techniques for a solid foundation for good health.



protecting the body from damage caused by free radicals. It is important to include fruit, both in the iftar and as part of breakfast before the day's fasting.

### Green tea

Full of antioxidants and cancer fighting properties, green tea re-hydrates and nourishes the body. It also contains polyphenols which protect the cells from oxidative stress and lower cholesterol levels.

### Brown rice

Brown rice contains complex carbohydrates, which prevent spikes of energy as they release energy gradually and keep you full for hours. This keeps the blood sugar levels stable, vitally important when fasting. Other foods that contain complex carbs are avocados, wholegrain breads and any wholemeal product.

### FEATURE SPONSORED BY:



*Where food takes the way it used to.*

Healthy Living is sponsored by Organic Foods & Café, the UAE's only certified organic supermarket. More details at: [www.organicfoodsandcafe.com](http://www.organicfoodsandcafe.com)