

Ramadān and healthy living

1.0. Introduction

Once we accept that Allāh is our Creator, once we accept that He has chosen Islam as a way of life for us and once we accept there is no better example than Sayyidunā Muhammad (peace be upon him), then we must also accept that Islam provides the best guidance on good health. We do not use a Samsung handbook for an Apple phone. Similarly, we should not look elsewhere for health advice when He is the one who created us.

Early Muslims knew this and believed in it. This is why they believed in the medicine of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Pick up *Sahīh al-Bukhāri* and there are separate chapters for Salāh, Zakāh and Hajj. There are also separate ones for food, water and the medicine of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The early Muslims took everything from Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including lifestyle choices, medicine and worldly guidance.

This paper will look specifically at Ramadān and the health benefits it brings.

2.0. Hunger is not a bad thing: its benefits in terms of spirituality.

'Man has never filled a container worse than his stomach.'

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

Spiritual masters have focused on hunger considerably. In his *al-Risāla*, Imam al-Qushayrī includes a chapter on fear, dhikr and ihsān, and one on hunger too. Or to word it differently, they considered hunger to be a spiritual state, not necessarily a physical one. They focused considerably on hunger, not to create anorexics but to teach self-discipline. This is because the stomach is the key impulse of people. If a person can control this then all the other desires will follow suit. This is why:

*The Prophet (peace be upon him) advised unmarried people to fast; it is an exercise to teach restraint.

*Good restraint and self-control solves many personal and social problems too. The rise in payday loans is due to the fact that we have no control over our budgets anymore. We cannot say no anymore to food, no to clothes or no to gadgets. When we want, we get. Simple.

*This is why Imam al-Qushayrī said, 'For me to raise my hands from my plate while I am hungry is better than the whole night in prayer'. This is a reminder of how much of our religion is based on good self-control.

*The Prophet (peace be upon him) had water flow from his fingers. He provided *Rizq* for all. He is the Qāsim (distributor) of Allāh's provision. Yet he **chose** a life of hunger and poverty. This is an important lesson for us all.

*In his Du'ās, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) used to seek refuge from a 'heart that is never satisfied'. After eleven months of demanding and expecting more, Ramadān teaches us to suffice on less. Again, this is good for a person spiritually.

*When a person is hungry and thirsty, ironically he appreciates Allāh's favours more not less. He thoroughly enjoys the first sip of water at Iftār. We only truly appreciate light in the darkness of the night. We only appreciate the value of health when we are ill. Likewise, we only appreciate the value of food and water when we are deprived of it.

*Hunger leads to more productivity. No one achieves greatness on a full stomach. The Huffāz who lead Salāh al-Tarāwīh barely eat at Iftār, even though they have fasted for nineteen hours. If they eat a large amount, they find the Salāh difficult in terms of concentration.

*In short, we have forgotten what hunger feels like, which means we have forgotten the Sunna of the Messenger (peace be upon him). Hunger should be eradicated at all costs. But for the satiated, it is desired.

3.0. What happens to the body during a fast?

3.1. Stage One

Technically, the body enters into the fast state eight hours after Sehri. This is when the gut finishes the job of absorbing the nutrients from the food consumed.

Note: This point also indicates why we should refrain from too many snacks between meals. When we do, then our digestive system never gets a rest at all; it is constantly breaking down the food.

We have all experienced how we are sometimes faced with several jobs, and then someone demands more from us. We have enough reading, and then we are loaded with more. The stomach feels exactly the same way. We have not digested breakfast properly and we are snacking two hours later.

3.2. Stage Two

Body glucose (which is stored in the liver and muscles) then becomes the major source of energy for the body.

3.3. Stage Three

Once this finishes, fat becomes the next store of energy. It is at this point that fasting can lead to healthy weight loss. Using fat as energy also preserves the muscles and reduces the cholesterol level.

In the case of prolonged and continuous fasting, the body will start using protein as a source of energy. This is known as starvation and it is obviously unhealthy. Because Ramadān is not for continuous days, there is no chance of this happening. It can be dangerous and weakening to the body (because it breaks down the muscle for protein supply).

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) forbade fasting for prolonged periods. However, he himself used to perform this practice because His Lord would provide him with sustenance. This indicates too how physically and spiritually strong Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) really was.

4.0. What does regular fasting do to the body?

In general, fasting brings health benefits. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said: 'Keep fasts and [as a result of doing so] become healthy.' If we love him more than our own parents, children and all of humanity, we should believe in his words. If he affirms fasting brings about good health, then we should have no doubt.

4.1. Help with healing

An average man requires up to 1500 calories per day for the normal functioning of the body. Up to 130-200 calories are used to digest & absorb an average meal. So overall with every meal, up to 20% of our caloric intake is used to digest & absorb food.

When we fast – by resting our digestive system– we are saving on this 20% energy and we are then using it to heal and recuperate our body. This freed up energy is then directed towards detox, repair of cells, tissues & organs. This is what leads to better health overall and good quality of life.

We can understand this process when we remember how we lose our appetite when we fall ill during a major illness. This is a natural response from the body. To recover from an illness, our body needs energy to kill the germs, to get rid of the dead tissue and to regenerate new tissue. Because eating more and the subsequent digestion and absorption itself requires energy, the body goes without it and instead spends energy on the healing process.

4.2. Benefits of calorie reduction

Fasting reduces our overall intake of **calories** (by eating less food). This reduced caloric intake in turn leads to some general benefits: These include:

- *The reduced risk of cancer
- *The reduced risk of heart diseases
- *The reduced risk of diabetes (lowering of blood sugar levels – ideal for type 2 Diabetics)
- *The reduced risk of obesity
- *Improvement to our immune system
- *Slowing down of the ageing process

4.3. Other benefits of fasting

There are also some specific medical benefits of fasting. For example:

- *Improved Lipid Profile, which then reduces bad cholesterol.
- *Lower blood pressure.
- *Fasting has also been found to help with allergic conditions, arthritis, digestive disorders and skin conditions.
- *One recent study found that when cancer patients fasted for three days before chemotherapy treatment, their immune system improved, which then helped counter the possible damage from the chemotherapy treatment.
- *Though the research is still ongoing, there are suggestions that regular fasting can delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease, a condition that still has no cure.

5.0. The benefits of Salāh al-Tarāwīh in Ramadān

In a month where Muslims are already required to fast for long periods of time, one might ask why Allāh has decreed a prolonged prayer in the form of Salāh al-Tarāwīh during this month too. Apart from the obvious spiritual benefits, there are unbelievable health benefits too in performing these prayers.

After Iftār, the blood glucose level continues to rise from the food taken in. Just before the Iftār, the blood glucose and insulin levels are at their lowest level. So Tarāwīh is instrumental (because of the light body movement) in ensuring balance once again.

Eating considerably and then lying down (or not moving) is very harmful for the body. Salāh al-Tarāwīh stops this from happening.

6.0. Potential health complications and their remedies

6.1. Heartburn.

The stomach is largely acidic, partly because it is required to break down food and to kill bacteria. If too much acid is produced then this causes heartburn. Those who are medication for indigestion are advised to continue during this month (Gaviscon, for example) at Sehrī times. Avoiding oily, deep-fried foods or very spicy food can also control heartburn. Sleeping on a higher pillow is also said to assist.

6.2. Headaches

There are many reasons for this; caffeine or nicotine withdrawal, inadequate rest or hunger. Drinking lots of fluids at Sehrī and Iftār is imperative. Avoiding direct sunlight can also be a solution. If someone suffers from severe migraines, medical advice should be sought.

6.3. Dehydration

Dehydration is when the body continues to lose water and salts through breathing, sweating and going to the toilet. The water loss is affected by the weather, how much one had to drink at Sehrī, the degree of physical work and the ability of the kidneys to retain water and salts. Prevention is better than cure. Muslims should always make sure they drink plenty of fluid at Sehrī and Iftār.

7.0. Diabetes

Diabetes is a condition where the amount of glucose¹ in the blood gets too high. This happens when (i) the pancreas doesn't make any insulin² (ii) the pancreas doesn't make enough insulin to help the glucose enter the body's cell.

When a person has diabetes, it means the body cannot make proper use of this fuel so it builds up in the blood which can be dangerous.

The experts have identified two types of diabetes.

Type 1 is where the body cannot produce any insulin (10% of sufferers), which we need to break down the glucose (energy) in what we eat and drink.

Type 2 is where the body cannot make enough insulin, or when the insulin being produced by the body does not work properly (90%, can be due to obesity).

Why is diabetes important for those keeping fasts? After eight hours of fast, the body starts to use energy stores to keep our blood glucose (sugar) levels normal. For most people, this is not a problem. For those suffering with diabetes, they are at risk of low blood glucose levels, which is called hypoglycaemia. Sometimes, after a larger meal (Sehrī or Iftār), there is a risk of high blood glucose levels.

Anyone who suffers from diabetes must seek the advice of their doctor. They should act upon their advice. They may recommend the fasts are kept in the winter months when the fasting is shorter. If someone is fasting, they can check their glucose levels; this does not break the fast. If someone is fasting and their blood glucose level becomes very high or very low, they are permitted to break the fast.

¹ Glucose: This comes from digesting carbohydrates and it's also produced by the liver.

² Insulin: this is a hormone produced by the pancreas that allows glucose to enter the body's cell, so that it can be used for fuel for energy.

8.0. What should be encouraged in Ramadān?

***(Complex) Carbohydrates** foods that are high in energy. They are usually found in food high in fibres, which break down more slowly, giving you a steady blood sugar level through the day. Examples are:

- Fresh Fruit, in particular apricots, raspberries, strawberries and blackberries.
- Non-starchy vegetables.
- Brown Bread and cereal.
- Barley, wheat and oats.
- Lentils.
- Nuts.
- Haleem is an excellent source of protein and it is a slow-burning food
- Dairy products that are not sweetened with sugar (yogurt, milk and cheese).

***Dates:** We should be consuming dates simply because it is the Sunna of the Messenger (peace be upon him). Upon closer inspection, we realise the wonderful wisdom behind this encouragement from him; dates are an excellent source of carbohydrate, glucose, potassium and magnesium. Iftar is the time when Muslims need to hydrate themselves. Because they contain potassium (64% more than a banana), the body hydrates much quicker.

***Figs:** They contain key minerals such as calcium, iron, magnesium and potassium. They are also a great source of fibre and can support healthy blood sugar levels.

***Other food that is excellent in Ramadān includes:**

- Porridge
- Zamzam water
- Fish
- Raw, unfiltered honey. It keeps the body energized.
- Olive oil in foods.

9.0. What should be avoided in Ramadān? Bad habits.

Fasting cannot make us ill, not least because Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) told us it improves our health. However, we sometimes see the opposite of this during Ramadān. We observe that people begin to fall ill at the start of Ramadān. During Salāh al-Tarāwīh, we hear people coughing constantly. Many will get flu, headache, chest infections or viral illness during Ramadān. The reality is that this is due to *our* shortcomings, not because of the nature of fasts.

Fasting will not make anyone ill. However, it is our food intake – and more importantly type of food we eat – that makes us ill. Unfortunately these days we have a boom of food culture. Even non-Muslims seem to have realised that

Muslims tend to eat a great deal during Ramadān and hence the Supermarket offers, restaurant deals and so on. In fact, we end up loading our body with more food during Ramadān than in other months. This is why we fall ill. We will only gain the true blessings of fasting when we are feel the hunger, when we are feeling the thirst and our lips are dry from dehydration.

Foods to avoid are the fast-burning, heavily processed foods that contain refined carbohydrates (sugar and white flour). Foods and drinks that should be avoided include:

- Fried and fatty foods, such as pakoras, samosas (baked samosas are better).
- Food containing excessive sugar, such as mithai.
- High-fat cooked foods such as parathas and oily curries.
- Soft drinks, because they stimulate faster water loss through urination.

Cooking methods that should be avoided are

- *Deep frying.
- *Frying.
- *Excessive use of oil.

Shallow frying, grilling and baking is better.

10.0. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to show that along with the amazing and incalculable spiritual benefit, there are many health benefits too. Many people concentrate on the dieting aspect of Ramadān and truly hope it will lead to weight loss. Overall, we should be focusing on the spiritual aspects of it. If our heart becomes sound, then the body automatically finds energy and peace. If ones solely concentrates on the health aspect and ignores the spiritual, then there is little to be gained from this blessed month.

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