

Healthy fasting during Ramadan and exam season



**Blackburn Central
HIGH SCHOOL**

Aspire and achieve

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?

This year the body enters into a fasting state four hours 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 (Sehri) and dusk meals (Iftari). 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.

Who should fast?

Fasting is compulsory for those who are mentally and physically fit, past the age of puberty, in a settled situation (not travelling), and are sure fasting is unlikely to cause real physical or mental injury.

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 chicken
- 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's also worth avoiding the caffeine content in drinks such as tea, coffee and cola, which are diuretics and stimulates faster water loss.

End of Ramadan?

The end of Ramadan is celebrated by the Festival of Eid ul-Fitr (Festival of Fast-Breaking) and special prayers at the end of Ramadan. Eid begins with special morning prayers on the first day of Shawwal, the month following Ramadan on the Islamic lunar calendar.

During Eid, Muslims greet each other with the phrase "taqabballah ta'atakum," or "may God accept your deeds" and "Eid Mubarak", meaning "blessed Eid."

Don't Skip Sehri!

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.

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 tablets 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.

What foods should I eat at Sehri & Iftar?

SEHRI

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!



QUICK TIPS

- Eat normal sized, nutritious meals at Sehri 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

How to help someone fast?

Co-workers, students and teachers can help by understanding the significance of Ramadan and by showing a willingness to make minor allowances for its physical demands.

It is also very important that Muslim workers and students be given time to attend Eid prayers at the end of Ramadan. Eid is as important to Muslims as Christmas and Yom Kippur are to Christians and Jews.

The School Day

As the Isha (Evening prayer) will be late followed by the Taravee prayers (special prayers during the month of Ramadan), staying awake to have the Suhoor (start of the fast) and then Fajr (sunrise prayers), please can students ensure that they eat the right food which will give them energy and take a rest after school each day so that they can remain focused during the school day. Rooms will be available at break and lunch for students who are fasting.

