



Ramadan: Fast Nutrition

Background

Ramadan is annual month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and practice of kindness and patience. It involves fasting from sunrise until sunset, every day, abstaining from all food and drink (including water).

Meals are eaten before sunrise (Suhoor), and after sunset (iftar). Anything that enters the mouth breaks the fast. Ramadan occurs on the 9th month of the Islamic (lunar) calendar so the exact dates can vary but it lasts between 29-30 days.

Fasting is obligatory for all adults unless they are unwell, elderly, pregnant or breastfeeding. Some people with chronic illnesses may still want to fast and special care and support should be given to ensure this is done as safely as possible.

Conditions that may complicate fasting include metabolic disorders and diseases such as diabetes and eating disorders.

Fasting & the Body

The impact of fasting:

When fasting, no extra fuel is coming in, so the body breaks down our energy stores from the muscles, the liver, and fat. This provides glucose into the blood stream to keep us going.

Since the body cannot store water, it conserves as much water as possible, but some losses are inevitable, especially during warmer weather or exercise.

This makes it extra important to replace lost liquids with drinks once the fast is broken.



Watch out for dehydration and hunger which can result in headaches, irritability, low mood, difficulty concentrating, and dizziness.

The fasting period can become longer as the daylight hours increase, so it's important to adjust our eating and drinking with this.

Terms:

Eid-al-Fitr: completion of the holy month, celebrates the first day of Shawwal and features a communal celebration with food and gift exchange. "Eid Mubarak" expresses celebration for Eid and translates to "blessed Eid".

Suhoor: Meal before sunrise.

Iftar: Meal after sunset.

For those who cannot or choose to not fast, other changes can be implemented such as increasing prayer, making donations "Fidya", or other selfless acts.

Eating and Drinking Tips

- Hydrate on nutritious fluids i.e, smoothies, fruit juice, soups, stews, jelly.
- If dehydration is more severe – i.e., you feel dizzy or disorientated – electrolyte/sports drinks may be useful i.e. ones with sugar and salt. If you do find yourself feeling faint, lying on your back with your legs elevated above your head can be helpful and when you feel well enough, it is important to rehydrate.
- Reduce salt intake to reduce risk of dehydration and thirst. Foods high in salt include sauces, cheese, chutney etc. Use herbs and spices instead to make food more interesting.
- Prioritise protein, fruit, vegetables, to meet micronutrient requirements.
- Consider a 10mcg daily supplement of vitamin D. Since the sunlight hours are still limited and you may not be getting as much nutrition as you are used to, a vitamin D supplement might help you get what you need.
- Hydrate before and after fast and pace yourself. Try to drink away from the meal to prevent feeling full too early.
- If you or your medical team are concerned about weight loss - Fortify foods – add milk powder to soups, extra tahini in hummus, use vegetable oil in cooking, switch to full fat milk.
- If you struggle to eat enough at one meal, or feel full and uncomfortable quickly, try have iftar into several meals with the “little-and-often” mindset to help make sure you are eating enough.
- Have balanced meals – Eatwell guide. Eating lots of deep fried and high fat foods can result in weight gain, despite fasting.
- Be mindful when eating and try and slow down eating pace, paying attention to fullness and hunger cues. Eating too quickly and too much at once can make you feel sick and upset your tummy.
- Suhoor helps set you up for the day so choosing foods that are nutritious and rich in fluid can help support your energy levels during the day.
- Light-moderate exercise can help with general health and wellbeing as well as keeping the bowels regular.

Keeping things moving

Constipation:

Changes to when you eat and the amount you eat can impact how your bowels move – try to have plenty of fluids, and include a range of high fibre foods i.e., fruit, veg, wholegrains.

This could include high-fibre cereals, adding ground flaxseed to meals, beans, lentils, dried fruit, nuts. Be sure to have these with plenty of water because increasing fibre means that more water is drawn into the gut and more fluid is needed to balance this out.

Things like dates which are eaten traditionally to break the fast are a good example of food to help provide fibre and nutrients like potassium, manganese, and copper.

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Sources: A Healthy Ramadan, The Nutrition Foundation (2019); Ramadan and Diet, British Dietetic Association (2022).