

How to fast safely during Ramadan: What the science shows

March 8 2024, by Feisal Subhan



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For [1.9 billion Muslims](#), Ramadan is the ninth and holiest Islamic month and this year starts on March 11. During the 30 days of Ramadan, many Muslims fast, refraining from food, drink, smoking and sex, between

dawn and sunset each day.

Fasting is only compulsory for adult Muslims. There are [exemptions](#) for people who are sick, elderly, pregnant, breastfeeding, menstruating or traveling.

As Ramadan slowly moves across seasons, the fasting days are getting cooler and shorter than last year, at least for those in the northern hemisphere and those close to the equator. Regardless of where you live, it is important to drink plenty of fluids when breaking your fast at sunset and when you start your fast at dawn.

Scientific research has shown that fasting is [good for your health](#). Animal studies have shown fasting results in longer life and better health. In humans, research suggests body weight, [blood glucose](#), blood cholesterol and blood pressure all [improve with fasting](#).

In terms of mental health, Ramadan fasting improves [mental health](#) and [lessens depression symptoms](#). Of course, there is an immense spiritual benefit too.

Many homes prepare [traditional foods](#) at the time of breaking the fast, often with fried food and sweets. A healthy alternative would be [fresh fruit](#); dates have always been a common tradition.

One of the benefits of breaking fast with fruit is that it provides plenty of glucose for the organs, especially the brain.

Similarly, at dawn, a meal with protein, fat and [complex carbohydrates](#), such as whole grains and beans, can be useful as fats can slow digestion, giving a fasting person a feeling of being full for longer. Complex carbohydrates also provide energy for longer.

Fluid intake is vital, especially if the weather is warmer and the fasting person is planning [strenuous exercise](#).

Physical activity

Lifestyle choices are important for your health. Apart from diet, exercise is important, too. Most exercises can be performed in Ramadan, but don't expect to keep to your pre-Ramadan levels.

If you feel dehydrated, too tired or weak, then stop. A good time to exercise is in the morning or later afternoon when the outdoor temperature could be lower. However, this would not affect indoor exercises.

People whose professions require them to be physically active need to be careful that they don't get dehydrated or suffer heat exhaustion—or worse, heatstroke.

Workers in hot climates need to be careful during the hottest part of the day (12 noon to 3pm). If you do need to go out a lot, be sensible and try to stay in shaded areas, if possible. When opening your fast, drink cool fluids and add a pinch of salt too, as excess sweating makes us lose salt. And wear light clothes.

Smoking and vaping are not permitted when fasting, so if you smoke or vape, it might be a good time to try to quit.

Smoking is the [leading preventable cause of death](#) in the world. Think of using nicotine gum to help you quit when you break your fast. Islamic scholars allow the use of nicotine patches while fasting.

What about the sick?

If fasting would worsen a health condition, you should avoid fasting. However, many people with [chronic diseases do fast](#) without any problems.

If you have an illness and you want to fast, you should consult your doctor first, especially if you have a chronic health condition, such as diabetes, a heart condition or hypertension (high blood pressure).

If [fasting](#) makes you more ill, how is it beneficial if you can't perform your normal acts of worship, or you need to be taken to the hospital?

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