

Learn tips on how to safely fast this Ramadan.

The healthy way to fast during Ramadan

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With long days and the searing heat of the summer, those fasting this Ramadan will need to take special precautions to ensure they remain healthy throughout the holy month.

The daily fasting period – up to 15 hours – will be the longest in 32 years and no doubt will test strength and determination, but with the right management – including diet, sleep and exercise – our bodies needn't suffer. In fact, it's an opportunity to turn our diets and bad eating habits around and even lose a few kilograms.

Hala Abu Taha, dietitian for The American Surgecenter medical facility in Abu Dhabi, says that the way the body reacts to the lack of food and water depends on the length of the fast. "The body enters into a fasting state eight hours or so 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," Taha says.

Dr Farhana bin Lootah, an internal medicine specialist from the Imperial College London Diabetes Centre, says that during this period it is even possible to lose weight. "When the body has less food, it starts to burn fat so that it can make energy. The use of fat for energy helps weight loss," she says. "It preserves the muscles and eventually reduces your cholesterol level. In addition, weight loss results in better control of diabetes and reduces blood pressure. However, if one does eat more than normal during Ramadan, this can have adverse effects, including weight gain through overeating when breaking the fast. The key is to make sure you eat in moderation. Indeed, smaller amounts more frequently can be more comfortable all round."

It is also vital that enough water – at least two litres – is consumed through the non-fasting hours to maintain balanced hydration.

"Water is very important, and should ideally be the main fluid you use to replenish your thirst during Ramadan," bin Lootah says. "Unfortunately though, some people do not drink enough and have only small amounts at iftar and then forget to drink water until the next day. Water also plays a significant role in weight loss and maintenance because it helps to get rid of toxins and reduce the feeling of hunger.

"Try not to drink large quantities of water all at once, or a lot during a meal. Instead, drink water between your meals and drink small quantities of water throughout the Ramadan nights. In addition to water, try fresh fruit or vegetable juices rather than sweetened ones."

Because food and fluid intake is restricted during the day, it is important to make sure that everything you consume counts, from choosing the right foods at iftar to a snack and drink before sunrise for suhoor.

"Iftar should always start with a source of simple sugar to compensate for energy lost during the long fasting hours and nothing beats dates for that," Taha says. "Along with dates, a cup of laban

could be consumed as a good source of minerals and protein for the body. A cup of warm, non-creamy soup helps the stomach to receive food with better digestion and less discomfort.”

She recommends leaving a 10-minute break for the stomach to start working before starting on the main meal. Ideally, this should include sources of lean protein, such as grilled fish or chicken, low-glycemic carbohydrates, such as brown rice or boiled sweet potatoes, and vegetables, raw or cooked, with a little oil.

Although it may be tempting to reward the day’s abstinence with sugary, fatty and deep-fried dishes, Taha warns against indulging in the wrong types of food. “It’s common in Ramadan to enjoy certain types of appetisers, such as samosas or kibosh. However, having them in a lighter version, that is baked not fried, will guarantee less after-meal discomfort and less calorie intake.”

Because the body is lacking energy, we often crave sugary treats that give an almost instant hit. But, again, Taha suggests choosing wisely to ensure our bodies get nutrients and fibre, rather than empty calories. She suggests consuming fruit and limiting the number of Ramadan desserts. She says that having Ramadan sweets such as katayef could be healthy if it’s prepared in a healthy way, such as baked instead of fried, and omitting or adding just a small amount of syrup, rather than dipping.

While it is tempting to sleep, waking before dawn for suhoor is also an important step in maintaining health during Ramadan. “People tend to skip this meal, ignoring the fact that our body needs a source of energy to maintain production levels during the day,” Taha explains. “A perfect suhoor meal will consist of complex carbohydrates, such as whole-wheat bread with protein, boiled eggs, turkey slices or white cheese. What could make a suhoor meal even healthier is a cup of low-fat milk or laban and a bowl of freshly cut vegetables.”

When it comes to exercise, bin Lootah suggests moderate exercise just before breaking your fast, before bedtime and again before suhoor. “It will be quite warm during Ramadan this year and outdoor exercise might not always be the best option, so try climbing the stairs. Start slowly and gradually with two flights at a time and refrain from pushing yourself too hard during the first few days. Thirty minutes divided during the day is as beneficial.

“Of course, after the sun sets and just before dawn breaks, a short but brisk walk for at least 10 minutes is a good practice to adopt during Ramadan. If you could walk three times a day for 10 minutes each time, this would be very good.”

Another helpful tip is to park your car farther away from your destination, or enjoy a walk around the mall.