

Article by Alia Almoayed

How To Maximize Your Fasting This Ramadan?

The theory behind fasting makes perfect sense. On a humanitarian level, it increases our awareness and appreciation for food and spurs us to help the needy. It is a time to be more religious and spiritual; and, because you're not eating most of the day, you realise you have a lot more time to pay more attention to other non food-related things.

On a physical level, fasting has a lot of benefits. You take a break from eating to rest your digestive system. Once your digestive system is rested, it can heal and flourish; but also, when your digestive system is not busy digesting food, your energy levels increase because digestion usually takes about 50% of our energy.

Fasting also helps improve your ability to detoxify unwanted substances. This happens by giving the body a break from the daily load of toxins that may have been coming from cigarettes, caffeine, fizzy drinks, sweeteners, or foods with additives and colourings. Once the intake of toxins is reduced, the liver – which is the main detoxification organ – has a chance to regenerate and work more efficiently.

So, if fasting is so good for you why do you feel so tired and cranky during Ramadan?

Although fasting should be a time for regeneration and good health, the list of complaints that I hear from people is endless. Most people tend to feel tired and moody while fasting, and then bloated and lethargic after eating! I also found that people get headaches, constipation, and sugar cravings during Ramadan, while others can't concentrate during the day, and often gain weight by the end of the month.

With all these draw-backs and health complaints, some of you may wonder whether fasting is suitable for our fast-paced lives today. As a nutritional therapist, I can easily tell you that not only is fasting suitable for people today, but it is crucial. The problems lie not in the theory of fasting, but more in the approach and method of implementation.

Do you find that when you're fasting you can't think of anything else but food? Do you daydream about lush buffets and mouth-watering desserts? Do you find yourself gorging on food the minute the sun sets, and then craving coffee and dessert afterwards? Do you find that you eat a lot more fried foods and comfort food during Ramadan than any other time of the year? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you are most likely suffering from the side-effects of "fasting-gone-wrong."

If you were to go to a health expert for a detox plan, then you will be under strict rules and conditions to make the detox work and to make sure your body is ready to handle the possible side-effects. Fasting is a form of detox. In Ramadan, however, many of us go about our normal lives and eating habits (many of which are unhealthy) and then plunge into fasting without preparing the body for what's to come.

In this section, I will tell you about the most common complaints and why they occur. Then, I will give you quick, easy-to-follow guidelines on each to help you maximise your fasting so it can be easier for you and more beneficial for you body.

What's Your Complaint?

I get so tired

During Ramadan, most people are too tired during the day because they haven't eaten anything, and too tired after iftar¹ because they feel stuffed after the meal. Fatigue when fasting can happen for a number of reasons. The most common reason is the lack of food (energy) coming into the body; but it can also be a sign that your body is detoxifying. To minimise fatigue and boost your energy levels, try to have a small meal at sunset (Iftar) and follow it by small meals or snacks every two hours. This helps distribute the energy over the evening and give you more stamina the next day.

I get headaches and brain fog

For most people, headaches and brain fog (inability to concentrate) occur if they are used to drinking caffeine. Caffeine in tea and coffee is a stimulant, which increases circulation to the brain. Once it stops (especially if it stops suddenly), the brain will require a few days to adjust. If you are a caffeine-drinker, I would suggest you gradually cut it down a few weeks before fasting. During Ramadan, experiment with more herbal teas such as mint and chamomile, and try to avoid drinking caffeine in the evening as it can disrupt sleep patterns and set you up for another headache the day after.

I gain weight although I eat less

Eating less might be the exact reason why you gain weight during Ramadan. When you stop eating, your metabolism slows down. Then, when you have a big meal, your body immediately stores it as fat for fear of starvation. But since eating more often is not an option during Ramadan, you can apply that rule after sunset. It is more effective to eat small meals after sunset than it is to eat a huge meal and nothing else. Try to distribute your meals evenly in the evening, and always wake up for a small snack before sunrise (Suhoor). But there are other reasons why we gain weight as well. Depending on your household, most Bahraini families eat more fried foods, rich Ramadan dishes such as Harees and Thareed, and plenty of desserts. Although some of the traditional dishes are based on good theories (for example, Harees resembles porridge for easier digestion), many of them contain a lot of oil and red meat. If you want to maintain your weight during Ramadan, you have to cut out fried food and eat more protein than carbohydrates.

I get irritable and moody, and a strong craving for sweets

These are the classic symptoms of blood sugar imbalance, which accompanies fasting if it is not done correctly. It is caused by mainly by the lack of fuel reaching the brain, but more by eating the wrong foods the night before. The main culprits for these symptoms are caffeine and sugar. As mentioned earlier, caffeine needs to be gradually cut out to reduce these effects. And sugar? Since most people cringe at the thought of cutting out sugar, I have a better solution: first, avoid eating sugar at the start of the meal to reduce the chance of wanting it at the end of the meal. So, instead of having dates, have water or

¹ Iftar is the meal fasting people eat at sunset when breaking the fast

soup first. Then, at dessert time, go straight for the fruits before considering anything else. If you must have dessert, then opt for home-made desserts that contain no added sugar and use natural sweeteners instead, such as dates or raisins.

I get indigestion, bloating, and constipation

Any change in diet often results in a shift in digestion as well. Digestion is very often a window to your health. Foods that make digestion worse are white processed foods such as white rice and white bread, and lack of fibre from fruits, vegetables, and wholegrains such as brown rice. If you tend to get bloated easily, it is possible that you're drinking too much juice or that you're eating very quickly, gulping air in the process. Indigestion can easily be alleviated by cutting out fried greasy food and eating less quantity.

I don't mind hunger, I get so thirsty and dehydrated!

Thirst and dehydration are two symptoms that are not to be taken lightly, especially since Ramadan is moving into the summer months each year. To combat thirst: water, water, water (after sunset obviously). To get as much water as possible in the evening, drink two glasses as soon as the sun sets. Then, distribute your water intake throughout the evening. More importantly, avoid foods and drinks that cause dehydration. Salty foods, for example, will increase your need for water. Caffeinated drinks such as coffee and tea are also dehydrating and will make you thirstier the next day.

I can't be bothered to exercise when I'm fasting

Usually, once people start fasting, their exercise routine goes out the window. It may be because of the change in schedule, the lack of energy, or shortage of time; or all of the above. Whichever it is, the results are the same: no exercise = weight gain and lethargy. To make sure you remain active during Ramadan, set realistic goals. Obviously, you will be more tired during this month, so set an "easier" workout schedule for yourself so that you're more likely to stick to it. The best time to workout is an hour before Iftar where your body is at its lightest and you can eat and drink immediately after.

Got Your Period?

Women who have their periods are not expected to fast; however, they are required to make up the days after Ramadan (anytime in the year). In a way, women get a break from fasting during Ramadan, but for many that's a disadvantage. It's usually easier for the body to continue fasting for a month than it is to stop and start.

If you got your period during Ramadan, don't make the mistakes that many women make: Do not go back to your old habits such as drinking caffeine; try to keep your diet light and healthy so that you can go back into fasting much easier. Do not skip meals just because your husband or kids are not eating; try to keep your meals small and regular throughout the day. And finally, try to balance your hormone levels by cutting out dairy products and reducing red meat as much as possible.

10 Things To Try This Ramadan:

1. Drink two glasses of water at sunset. Avoid drinking with the meal. Drink 10 minutes before or 15 minutes after the meal to avoid diluting stomach acid and causing indigestion.
2. Chew slowly, keep your back straight while eating, don't talk while chewing, and eat your meal in 20 minutes NOT less
3. Avoid drinking juice, and if you must have juice then dilute it with 50% water
4. Incorporate more vegetarian sources of protein such as beans, lentils, nuts and seeds
5. Try baking your samboosas or falafels instead of frying them
6. Add raw nuts to your dates
7. Make desserts with no added sugar such as fresh fruits dipped in pure dark chocolate, or thick smoothies with coconut
8. Cut out toxins from caffeine, fizzy drinks, artificial sweeteners, cigarettes, aerosols, aluminium-containing deodorants, and insect sprays
9. Take up light regular exercise 1 hour before Iftar, three or four times a week
10. Maximise your fasting benefits by getting regular massages, practicing yoga, or using steam and sauna facilities

Alia Almoayed is a Nutritional Therapist running a busy nutrition consultancy in Bahrain, offering nutrition advice to the whole Middle East community. She writes health articles for various publications, holds lectures and seminars on health and nutrition, runs a weekly live radio health programme, and heads a number of weight loss projects. Alia is the author of *I Want Healthy Kids*, a book on how to raise healthy kids, and *The Dream Body Eating Plan*, a weight loss guide; she is also co-author of *101 Ways To Improve Your Health*. For more information, to book appointments, to get regular email health tips, or to request Alia's special FREE Report entitled: *5 Secrets Your Doctor Won't Tell You About Your Health*, visit www.AliaAlmoayed.com.