

## **Fasting For Health**

**There is a big health side to fasting that we often forget during Ramadan. Besides religious reasons, fasting can be done to boost immunity, help digestion, and add years to life...**

Fasting has many definitions all over the world, but it is most often done for religious or therapeutic purposes. In this part of the world, fasting is done mostly for religious reasons, and it includes abstaining from all food and drink from sunrise to sunset.

If you are not one for fasting, then you may be missing out on many of its benefits.

### **Benefits of Fasting**

Fasting is one of the best detoxification methods. It is a quick way to increase elimination of wastes and enhance the healing processes of the body.

Fasting also helps boost the immune system by lowering the blood sugar levels, particularly during the first few hours, which increases the ability of white blood cells to destroy harmful microbes. It also helps the removal of food allergens from the intestines.

Fasting helps the body to heal faster and gives the organs a much-needed rest. It allows damaged intestines to heal, which helps with inflammatory conditions such as arthritis, as well as allergies and intolerances. It also helps by cleansing the liver, kidneys and blood stream, which makes the body better at flushing built-up toxins out of the colon.

Fasting can add years to life. It increases longevity by increasing the rate of detoxification. Fasting, and food reduction in general, also release enzymes that help protect all body cells, thus increasing longevity and reducing the chances of disease.

If done correctly, fasting should give the individual an increased sense of well-being, renewed energy, clearer thought, and a sense of purity.

### **Consult your doctor before fasting if....**

- You are diabetic or suffer low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia)
- You have colon problems or other digestive problems such as peptic/gastric ulcers
- You are pregnant or lactating
- You suffer any other chronic health condition

### **Preparing the body for fasting**

Since fasting is a very strong method of detoxification, it is important that the body be prepared for eliminating the toxins. During fasting, the body releases toxins from fat stores into the bloodstream for elimination; but if the body doesn't have enough antioxidants and enzymes to help flush out the toxins, then the toxins become more dangerous because they circulate in the bloodstream and can affect different organs and cause many symptoms such as headaches and skin rashes.

For that reason, it is important that the diet is abundant in nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables and their juices. Also important for the detoxification process are green leafy salads, fibre from wholegrains, and water. Ideally, this diet should be started a few days before Ramadan and then carried out during the rest of the month, after Iftar (breaking the fast).

Resting is also important while fasting, as the body's energy can be directed toward healing instead of other body functions. It is a good idea to conserve energy while fasting to allow maximal healing. Short walks or light stretching are useful, but heavy workouts tax the system and inhibit repair and elimination. Exercise should be taken in the evening, a few hours after eating.

Your lifestyle during Ramadan should also aid the body in its elimination processes. In addition to taking frequent naps and light exercise, it is important to steer away from environmental toxins such as smoking and pollution. These may burden the body further and slow down the body's many efforts of detoxification.

### **What helps detoxification during fasting days**

- Herbal or fruit teas (unsweetened) – e.g. Echinacea, Dandelion, Chamomile, Peppermint
- Fibre from salads, fruits, vegetables, wholegrains such as brown rice, and legumes such as lentils and beans.
- Pure unprocessed olive oil
- Sugar-free fresh fruit and vegetable juices
- A quality multi-vitamin/mineral to provide general support
- Vitamin C (500-1000mg/day)

### **The mistakes**

Many people make the mistake of overeating at Iftar, when breaking their fast. This often comes as a natural reaction to food deprivation. And you often hear people saying, "I tend to gain weight during Ramadan although I'm fasting all day".

What often happens when we fast is that our metabolism slows down in an effort to conserve energy, which is our body's natural survival mechanism. Our body doesn't know that we are going to eat in a few hours, so it prepares for the worst: starvation. As a result, any food that enters the body after breaking the fast is treated differently from other days during the year. Food becomes more likely to be stored as fat for possible energy needs in the future, which may result in weight gain.

Another mistake that people make during Ramadan is eat rich, fatty, sugary foods. This, unfortunately, is a cultural habit that has shifted the focus of the month from 'fasting' to 'eating'. For example, desserts play a very big role at Iftar, and they are often very rich in sugar and saturated fats. The combination of rich carbohydrate meals, fatty/sugary desserts, and the lack of fibre from salads and vegetables often adds to weight and fat stores and defies the whole purpose of detoxification.

Also, because fasting can lead to low blood sugar, we often experience the symptoms of blood sugar imbalance, which include sweet cravings. That further contributes to weight gain as we give in to those cravings. That's why balancing blood sugar is very important; it requires eating small, frequent meals after Iftar, avoiding sugary and refined foods, reducing stimulants (tea/coffee), and adding protein to every meal and snack.

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### **A Healthy Iftar<sup>i</sup>**

After a whole day of fasting, it is important to have a small meal, eat slowly and to choose your foods carefully. Here are some pointers:

- When it is time to break your fast, start by drinking a glass of pure room-temperature water. This aids in flushing out any toxins that have accumulated during the day.
- Dates give a quick sugar rush to the body, which creates an energy boost and then a slump soon afterwards. To combat that, combine dates with raw nuts (like almonds or walnuts), which contain some protein and can slow the release of sugar into the blood.
- Introduce solid foods gradually by limiting your portions. Eat foods at room temperature and resist the temptation to overeat. Eat slowly and chew thoroughly.

- Always add protein with your carbohydrate-rich meal in order to avoid that energy slump after eating. For example, if you eat rice, combine it with chicken or lentils for a balanced meal.
- Drink sugar-free, fresh juices - which are diluted with 50% water - to minimise the effects of concentrated sugar entering the body. And try to drink either before or after the meal, not during.
- And don't forget to go easy on the sweets. Try to minimise or avoid the fatty, sugary desserts and learn to enjoy the natural sweetness of fruits!

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<sup>i</sup> *Iftar* refers to the meal eaten at sunset to break the fast

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