

Fasting in *Ramadhan*

This is a brief reference guide for clinicians and healthcare professionals.



What is Ramadhan?

Ramadhan is a holy month for Muslims. It begins with the sighting of the new moon at the start of the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. Fasting in this month is one of the five pillars of Islam. The month brings with it a unique opportunity to reap vast spiritual rewards and gain *God consciousness*. It is obligatory for Muslims to abstain from food, drink and sexual intercourse from dawn (*suhur*) until dusk (*iftar*). The month lasts 29/30 days. This is because the Islamic lunar calendar is based on the moon hence the month (and as a result the year) is shorter than the Gregorian solar calendar. This is why *Ramadhan* starts earlier every year.

"O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may gain God consciousness"¹

Who is Exempt from Fasting?

Fasting in *Ramadhan* is not obligatory for certain members of the Muslim community. These include:

1. Children
2. Menstruating women
3. Pregnant women
4. Breastfeeding mothers
5. Acutely unwell Muslims
6. Travellers
7. Frail elderly Muslims
8. Muslims suffering from chronic conditions that may adversely affect their health through fasting such as diabetes.

These individuals can still benefit from the spiritual blessings of *Ramadhan* by making up the missed fasts at a later date if this becomes possible such as in the case of travellers, menstruating, pregnant and breastfeeding women. However in cases where this is not feasible, *Ramadhan's* spiritual benefit can be gained through feeding the poor or donating money to charity in place of fasting.

"...And whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, let him fast the same number of other days. Allah desires for you ease..."²

A Typical Day

Suhur (Dawn)

The fasting day starts early. Muslims will usually wake before dawn and have their suhur/pre-fast meal. Currently this is around 2am. Muslims will usually then go through their day as normal except they must abstain from food and drink until sunset.

Iftar (Sunset)

The fast is traditionally broken with dates at sunset, which is currently around 10pm. This makes the current fasting day a very long one in the UK. Dates are followed with the *iftar* meal and congregational prayer known as *taraweeh*.

Benefits of Fasting

Ramadhan is seen not simply as a month without food and drink but as an opportunity to change oneself and reap vast physical and spiritual benefit. *Ramadhan* helps Muslims to:

1. Gain God consciousness
2. Build community spirit
3. Start a new beginning and make positive changes in life
4. Be generous and promote charitable acts
5. Develop discipline with food and drink as well as personal character and conduct
6. Lose weight and lead a healthier lifestyle
7. Detoxify from caffeine and tobacco

Healthy Eating

There are a few golden rules to a healthy diet when undergoing fasting in the month of *Ramadhan*:

1. Avoid overeating as a compensatory measure.
2. Maintain adequate fluid intake between *iftar* and *suhur*.
3. Avoid deep fried foods.
4. Limit caffeine intake as this can have a diuretic effect.
5. Include fresh fruits in *iftar* and *suhur* meals.
6. Maintain an adequate intake of complex carbohydrates at suhur and iftar (such as barley, oats, wheat, semolina, beans, lentils and basmati rice) as well as high fibre foods (such as bran, wholegrain cereals, granary bread, green beans and pulses).



¹ The Holy Qur'an chapter 2 verse 183.

² The Holy Qur'an chapter 2 verse 185

Islam encourages eating and drinking in moderation. The Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) advised Muslims to divide the appetite into three.

“... A third for food, a third for drink and a third left for air”³

Symptoms from Fasting and Potential Health Risks

As a result of abstaining from food and drink some Muslims may experience symptoms. Common symptoms/signs include:

1. Headache/Migraine
2. Indigestion
3. Constipation
4. Hypotension
5. Dehydration
6. Vasovagal syncope

Less commonly fasting may also potentiate the risks of more serious problems like **hypoglycaemia**, **thrombosis** and **renal problems**, particularly for those who may have pre existing risk factors.

Can Diabetic Muslims Fast?

Despite fasting not being an obligation for many diabetic Muslims, some may still wish to fast. An epidemiological study of Muslims with diabetes in 13 Muslim countries, known as the EPIDIAR study, showed that 43% of patients with type 1 and 79% of those with type 2 diabetes fasted during Ramadan⁴. In order to ensure this is done safely it is recommended these patients speak to their GP/diabetes service prior to *Ramadhan*.

High Risk Patients

1. Those with severe and recurrent episodes of hypoglycaemia and unawareness
2. Those with poor glycaemic control
3. Those with ketoacidosis in the three months before *Ramadhan*
4. Those who experience hyperosmolar hyperglycaemic coma within the three months before Ramadan
5. Those with acute illness

6. Those who perform intense physical labour
7. Pregnant women
8. Those with co-morbidities such as advanced macro vascular complications, renal disease on dialysis, cognitive dysfunction, uncontrolled epilepsy (particularly precipitated by hypoglycaemia)

Moderate Risk Patients

Well controlled patients treated with short acting insulin secretagogue, sulphonylurea, insulin, or taking combination oral or oral plus insulin treatment

Low Risk Patients

Well controlled patients treated with diet alone, monotherapy with metformin, dipeptidyl peptidase-4 inhibitors, or thiazolidinediones who are otherwise healthy

Table 1. Expert recommendations for risk stratification in patients with type 1 or type 2 diabetes who fast during Ramadan⁴

Insulin regimes may need to be modified and oral agents may need dose changes to accommodate the duration of the fast⁴. It may be worth reminding patients of the symptoms of hypoglycaemia to watch out for. These include:

1. Sweating
2. Shaking
3. Weakness
4. Dizziness
5. Confusion
6. Headache
7. Fatigue

Checking blood sugar does not invalidate the fast. Muslims are required to break their fast immediately if there is an evident threat to their health.

Fasting and Oral Medications



During the fast Muslims will generally not take any oral medications. They will be able to take their normal

medication after sunset until dawn. Reviewing medication prior to *Ramadhan* may be useful to minimise problems during the day such as switching regular painkillers to modified release preparations (where possible) to allow patients to have adequate pain relief through the day whilst fasting.

It may also be a useful opportunity to review diuretics and antihypertensive medication given fluid intake through the day will be significantly reduced as a result of fasting.

Smoking

It is prohibited for Muslims to smoke whilst fasting. Many Muslims will abstain from smoking during the fast for as long as 17 hours of the day. This may be an ideal opportunity to encourage smoking cessation.

Inpatient Hospital Stays

Acutely unwell Muslim patients admitted into hospital during Ramadan are usually unable to fast. However, enabling them to take part in other aspects of *Ramadhan* can have an immensely beneficial effect on their spiritual and mental wellbeing as well as alleviating some of the anxiety they may be experiencing at being unable to fast. This can include access to religious artefacts such as prayer mats, the Qur'an, prayer beads, assistance with finding the direction of Mecca (*Qibla*) for prayer and ritual washing.

Life After Ramadan

The end of *Ramadhan* is marked with a 3-day festival known as *Eid-ul-Fitr*. This is usually marked with festivities and the sharing of food and drink. It may be important to be aware of the risks of hyperglycaemia at this time as many may over indulge. Many Muslims may choose to continue to fast after *Eid-ul-Fitr* as optional fasting or as an opportunity to make up the missed fasts during Ramadan.

Happy Ramadhan

On Behalf of Muslim Health Service

www.muslimhealthservice.com

³ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi

⁴ E Hui et al. Management of people with diabetes wanting to fast during Ramadan, *BMJ* 2010;340:c3053