

Healthy Ramadhan

One of the miracles of Islam is the month of Ramadhan, a month in which we can cleanse ourselves, not only spiritually, but physically as well. Ramadhan is a time of worship, but physical ailments can sometimes cause us to lose our spiritual focus. Here is some useful advice on how to avoid common problems that occur during Ramadhan.

'Detox' yourself

If you are in the habit of drinking several cups of tea, coffee or other drinks that contain caffeine, start cutting back one to two weeks before Ramadhan begins. Tea and coffee contain caffeine which is addictive and can cause severe headaches on withdrawal.

If you are a smoker, start cutting down the amount you smoke one to two weeks before Ramadhan. Ramadhan is an ideal month to stop smoking completely.

Ramadhan Diet

During Ramadhan, your diet should not differ very much from your normal diet and should be as simple as possible. The ideal diet should maintain your normal weight, neither decreasing nor increasing it during the month. However, if you are overweight, Ramadhan is an ideal time to lose weight.

To prepare for a long day of fasting, slow-digesting foods and foods with lots of fibre are better than fast-digesting foods. Slow-digesting foods last between 8 and 12 hours, while fast-digesting foods last only for 2 to 4 hours.

- Slow-digesting foods contain grains and seeds. Examples are barley, wheat, oats, millet, semolina, beans, lentils, etc.; whole meal flour; whole meal pasta; unpolished rice. They are also known as complex carbohydrates.

- Fibrous foods contain bran, examples are cereals; whole wheat or whole meal flour; grains and seeds, such as beans and lentils; vegetables such as green beans, peas, marrow, spinach, beetroot leaves which are rich in iron, etc.; fruit with skin, dried fruit, especially dates, dried apricots, figs, prunes, etc.; nuts.

- Fast-digesting foods contain refined carbohydrates such as sugar, white flour, white rice, white pasta, etc.

The ideal diet is well-balanced, containing foods from each food group – fruits, vegetables, meat, chicken or fish, bread, cereals and dairy products.

What to Eat

- Eating complex carbohydrates for suhur will help you fast without feeling too hungry. Examples of complex carbohydrates are muesli, bran-rich cereals, whole meal or brown bread, beans, lentils, etc.;

- Soups can be an excellent source of slow-burning food and protein, especially if made from barley and wheat;

- Dates are an excellent source of sugar, fibre, carbohydrates, potassium and magnesium;

- Almonds are rich in protein and fibre and are not fatty. Ground almonds and milk make a healthy drink;

- Bananas are a good source of carbohydrates, potassium and magnesium;

- Eat oven-grilled samosas rather than fried samosas.

What to Drink

Drink as much water or fruit juices as possible between iftar and bedtime so that your body can adjust fluid levels for the next day.

What to Avoid

- Fried and fatty foods should be avoided, they cause indigestion, heartburn, weight problems and blood circulation problems;

- Spicy foods and sauces;

- Foods containing too much sugar and refined carbohydrates;

- Overeating at suhur and iftar;

- Caffeinated drinks like tea, coffee, fizzy drinks, etc.;

- Smoking.

Common Problems

Constipation

Constipation can cause piles (haemorrhoids), fissures (painful cracks in the anal canal) and indigestion with a bloated feeling.

Causes: Eating too many refined carbohydrates, drinking too little water and not eating enough fibre.

Remedy: Eat more fibre and complex carbohydrates, drink more water, use bran for baking, and use brown flour when making bread.

Indigestion and Wind

Causes: Overeating causes indigestion, as does eating too much fried and fatty food, spicy food and food that produces wind, for example, eggs, cabbage, lentils, beans, carbonated drinks.

Remedy: Do not overeat, and drink adequate amounts of water and fruit juices. Avoid fried and fatty foods. Add thymol or celery seeds to lentils and beans.

Lethargy (Low blood pressure)

Symptoms: Weakness, tiredness, lack of energy, dizziness, especially when getting up from a lying or sitting position, a pale appearance and feeling faint. This tends to occur at the end of the day when you need more energy for worship.

Causes: Not drinking enough water, not enough salt in the diet, not eating enough before the fast begins and at iftar.

Remedy: Increase fluid and salt intake. Eat enough to sustain you through the next day. Drink at least one litre of water between iftar and bedtime.

Caution: If you have high blood pressure you may need your medication adjusted for the month of Ramadhan. Diuretics should be avoided.

Headaches

Causes: Caffeine and tobacco withdrawal, doing too much during the day, hunger, stress, lack of sleep etc.

Remedy: Reduce or eliminate caffeine intake one or two weeks before Ramadhan. Herbal teas and decaffeinated coffee can help. Reorganise your schedule so that you have enough time to perform your usual chores and tasks, and make sure you have enough rest.

Low Blood Sugar

Symptoms: Weakness, dizziness, tiredness, poor concentration, trembling, inability to do physical activities, headaches and palpitations.

Causes: Excessive sugary foods, for example, refined carbohydrates especially in the morning before the fast begins (suhur).

Remedy: Reduce the amount of sugary foods and drinks you consume, especially for suhur. Eat more complex carbohydrates. This applies people who are not diabetics. Diabetics will need to adjust their medication during Ramadhan. Please consult your doctor.

Muscle Cramps

Causes: Not enough calcium or magnesium in the diet.

Remedy: Eat foods rich in above minerals, for example fruit and vegetables, dairy products, meat, dried fruit and dates.

Caution: If you are on medication for high-blood pressure or are prone to kidney stones, consult your doctor.

Heartburn, Gastritis, Hiatus Hernia and Peptic Ulcers

Heartburn comes as a burning pain in the stomach area and under the ribs radiating up the chest to the throat. Increased levels of acid in an empty stomach during Ramadhan can aggravate heartburn and ulcers.

Causes: Spicy foods, especially sauces, can cause this, as well as coffee, carbonated drinks, and fatty and fried foods.

Remedy: Avoid all the above foods. Do not overeat. Have a few small meals instead of one big meal, eat a little after iftar and another snack after the tarawih prayer for example.

Medication is available (Gaviscon and PPIs) to control acid levels in the stomach. These should be taken daily for the whole month of Ramadhan.

Kidney Stones

Kidney stones may not be noticed for months or even years after they are formed.

Causes: Some people are prone to produce stones in the kidney. Even if you are not prone, not drinking enough liquids to flush out the kidneys can cause stones to form.

Remedy: Drink lots of water between iftar and bedtime. If you are prone to kidney stones you must also decrease the amount of calcium you eat by avoiding calcium-rich foods such as dairy products.

Joint Pains

Causes: The extra prayers of Ramadhan can often increase the pressure on the knee joints. In the elderly and those suffering from arthritis, this may result in pain, stiffness, swelling and discomfort.

Remedy: Lose weight so that your knees do not have to carry extra load. Exercise your lower body before Ramadhan by walking 30 to 45 minutes three times a week so that your knees will be prepared for the additional strain.

Being physically fit will help you perform your prayers with ease.