

# Who should fast and who is exempt from fasting

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## 1. Persons required to fast

Fasting is compulsory on any sane Muslim who has attained puberty. The age of fifteen is the limit between childhood and manhood (Bukhari, volume three, Hadith number 832). You should encourage your children to commence fasting before they attain the age of puberty so that they are prepared for their obligations.

## 2. Persons exempt from fasting

The Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH) make concessions for persons who cannot fast. The Quran states:

"(Fasting) for a fixed number of days; but if any of you is ill or on a journey the prescribed number (should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (with hardship) is a ransom the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more of his own free will it is better for him and it is better for you that ye fast if ye only knew." (2:184).

Persons who are ill and cannot fast during Ramadan should fast later to make up for the days not fasted in Ramadan. The same applies to persons who are travelling. Those who cannot fast at all (the Quran warns that it is better for you to fast than not to fast) the poor should be fed for every fast missed.

Islam does not seek to cause any hardship or burden you beyond your capabilities. Easiness and facilitation are among the main characteristics of Islam. The Quran states: "Allah intends every facility for you He does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful." (Al-Baqarah 185).

### Illness

The Holy Quran identifies two types of people that are exempt:

- (a) those that are not capable of fasting during the month of Ramadan and should fast in lieu of the fasts missed;

(b) those who are not capable of fasting at all and should feed the poor in lieu of the fasts missed.

### **Exemption due to illness in the month of Ramadan – not terminally ill**

The four schools concur that if a person falls ill, or fears the aggravation of his/her illness, or delay in recovery, then he/she is exempt from fasting. It is at the person's discretion as to whether he/she wants to fast. If the person elects not to fast then he/she must fast in lieu of the fasts missed.

### **Exemption due to permanent ailment or old age:**

Scholars state that the exemption from fasting only applies to persons who are only able to fast with great difficulty. Such persons are required to feed the poor. The Hanafi school are of the opinion that for a person to qualify for the exemption he/she must be "so weak and aged as to be unable to keep sawm (fast)<sup>1</sup>." If the person later regains sufficient strength to fast, the person will be liable to fast in lieu of the fasts missed.

### **Medication:**

If a person is required to take medication and "...he can take the medication before fasting and that would be sufficient and would not interfere with his health, then he can continue fasting. If, however, he must take medication during the day at all times without fail, then it is advisable for him not to fast. In this case he needs to offer *fidya* by feeding a poor person for every single day of fast he has missed; he does not need to make up for the fast he has missed if his sickness remains with him forever." (Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, a senior lecturer at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, Ontario, Canada).

### **Travelling**

Dr. `Abdur-Rahman Al- `Adawi, Professor of Fiqh at Al-Azhar University, states the following<sup>2</sup>:

"Almighty Allah says, **"... and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, (let him fast the same) number of other days."** (2:185).

In this verse, Almighty Allah makes it lawful for the traveller to not fast in Ramadan. The Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said, **"Allah has exempted the traveller from the obligation of fasting."**

"Consequently... not fasting certain days of Ramadan...is allowed for the traveller, but if someone finds that he is capable of fasting, fasting would be better, as Hamzah Al-Aslami once asked the Prophet (PBUH), "O Messenger of Allah, I feel able to fast when travelling, will I be sinful (if I fast while travelling)?" The Prophet (PBUH) said: **"It is a dispensation from Allah, he who makes use of it does good and he who likes to fast, there is no blame on him."** (Reported by Muslim)

"The dispensation for not fasting is the same as that for shortening the prayer (Qasr salaah), that is the distance of travelling should be (at least) 85 km. Besides, someone is not regarded as a traveller unless he goes beyond the inhabited area of the location where he lives. So, someone who intends to travel but neither starts the journey nor goes beyond his area is not permitted to miss the fast."

### **Menstruation**

Scholars concur that fasting is not permitted for women during menstruation. In his book *Fiqh-As-Sunnah*, the late Egyptian scholar Sheikh Sayyed Sabiq states<sup>3</sup>: "Scholars have unanimously agreed that it is mandatory for menstruating women and women who had post childbirth bleeding to break their fast and to make up for the days they missed later on (after Ramadan). Al-Bukhari and Muslim record that `A'ishah (may Allah be

pleased with her) said: **"When we would have our periods during the lifetime of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), we were ordered to make up for the days of fasting that we had missed but were not ordered to make up for the prayers we had missed."**

Scholars also concur that if a woman who is fasting experiences a menstrual flow, then she must break her fast immediately. She is not permitted to continue fasting and if she does so she still needs to re-perform the fast (Qazaa).

As to why women are exempt, **Dr. Muhammad M. M. Abu Laylah**, Professor of the Islamic Studies & Comparative Religions at Al-Azhar University, states<sup>4</sup>: "Part of the logic behind exempting menstruating women from fasting and prayer, is that upon the onset of the period the woman becomes very weak and experiences weakness and fatigue in her whole body, and that is why Allah, the Most Merciful, exempts her from fasting and prayer in order not to add to her weakness."

**Only menstrual and post natal bleeding exempts fasting.** A woman experiencing any other form of bleeding must seek an exemption under illness. Dr. `Abdul-Fattah `Ashoor, professor of Exegesis of the Qur'an at Al-Azhar University, states<sup>5</sup>: "A Muslim woman is exempted from prayer, fasting and circumambulating around the Ka`bah only if she experiences menstruation or post-natal bleeding. Other kinds of bleeding that might be caused as a result of operations do not prevent women from either prayer or fasting. Therefore, operations that are carried out in the uterus and may result in bleeding do not prevent the woman from either prayer or fasting. Such operations resemble other normal operations that may cause bleeding in other body organs."

Altering the menstruation date:

**Dr. Ahmad Shleibak**, member of the Fiqh Council of North America and Member of the Assembly of Muslim Jurists in America (AMJA) states that it is possible to alter the date of your menstruation by medication: "It is better not to do that, since that is mercy from Allah (swt), for the women, but if you do there is no problem and is not haram if you did it."

Making ghusl:

**Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi** is of the opinion that: "Women whose menstruation stops during the night may begin fast even if they have not made *ghusl* yet. In all these cases, bathing (*ghusl*) is necessary but fast is valid even without bathing."

**Pregnancy and breast feeding**

The schools concur that if a pregnant woman or a woman breast feeding fears harm to her own health or that of her child, she is exempt from fasting. Ibn Abbas (companion of the Prophet (PBUH) stated that the concession was made to women who were pregnant or breast feeding, if they "apprehended harm (to themselves)." (Source: Abu Dawud).

In his answer to a question on breast feeding, Dr. Muhammad M. Abu Laylah, professor of Islamic studies at Al-Azhar University, states<sup>6</sup>:

"Dear sister in Islam, if there is any harm to your baby if you stop breast-feeding him during the daytime or during the fasting hours, then you are allowed to break your fast and make up for what you miss of fast days whenever your circumstances allow. This rule is based on the fact that Islam cares about the health of the children as well as protecting them against any harm or disease."

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<sup>1</sup>Moulana Yusuf Ali: *The Essential Hanafi Handbook of Fiqh*.

<sup>2</sup>Intending to Travel: When to Not Fast? – Islamonline – 15 October 2003

<sup>3</sup>Menstruating Women: Should They Make Up for the Missed Fast-days? – Islamonline – 8 November 2003

<sup>4</sup>Why Menstruating Women Do Not Fast? – Islamonline – 1 December 2002

<sup>5</sup>Prayer or Fasting? – Islamonline – 13 October 2003

<sup>6</sup>Is a Nursing Mother Exempted from Fasting? – Islamonline – 13 April 2003