

The Month of Fasting for Muslims

Ramadan is a special month of the year for over one billion Muslims throughout the world. It is a time for inner reflection, devotion to God, and self-control. Muslims consider it a spiritual tune-up. Fasting (or *sawm*) requires a Muslim to abstain from eating, drinking, smoking or having sex for a certain period of the day. Each day of fasting lasts from dawn to sunset. Contrary to misconceptions, fasting has many benefits. These benefits relate to:

Health

Because one goes without food for long periods, his or her body is effectively cleansing itself on a daily basis. Fasting is also beneficial to one's health as it provides a break in the cycle of rigid habits or overindulgence.

Welfare

The daily hunger leads to empathy for those who are less fortunate and do not have food and drink on a daily basis.

Mental

Fasting strengthens one's discipline, willpower, moderation and patience.

Spiritual

Because fasting is an act of worship, one's mind and body are reminded of the purpose of fasting and one's relationship to Allah (God), thus making one more motivated and inclined to exercise and perform good deeds and keep away from bad habits. This is an example of God-consciousness, which is the central focus of fasting.

Who Fasts in Ramadan?

Fasting in Ramadan is obligatory for those Muslims who can perform it. The chronically ill, mentally challenged, and the elderly who are physically weak are exempt from fasting. Long distance travellers, those who are experiencing mild and serious illness, as well as women who are pregnant, breast-feeding or menstruating are exempt from fast, however, they must make up missed days after the month of Ramadan.

From Dawn to Sunset

The daily period of fasting starts at the breaking of dawn and ends at the setting of the sun. In between this time during the daylight hours, Muslims totally abstain from food, drink, smoking, and sex. The usual practice is to have a pre-fast meal (*suhoor*) before dawn and a meal to break the fast (*iftar*) after sunset.

Food in Ramadan

Since Ramadan is a special time, Muslims in many parts of the world prepare favourite foods during this month. As Ramadan emphasises the importance of community and because all break their fasts at the same time, Muslims often invite one another to share in the Ramadan evening meal.

Some Muslims find that they eat less for dinner during Ramadan than at other times due to stomach contraction. However, generally most Muslims experience little fatigue during the day since the body becomes used to the altered routine during the first week of Ramadan.

Depending on the traditional moon sighting that confirms the start and end of Ramadan, this year Ramadan will begin in mid September (either 12th or 13th) and will end in mid October (11th or 12th).

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