

How to commence and break a fast

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1. Commencing a fast

Niyyat (Intention)

A person must state his intention to fast. Remaining without food and drink for the entire day will not render such abstention a fast.

Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, a senior lecturer at the Islamic Institute of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, states¹: “Intention is an extremely crucial and integral aspect of worship in Islam; this is true of Prayer, fasting, zakah and Hajj; it also applies to all of the acts of devotion and good works that we perform. In the case of any act of worship (*‘ibadah*), the intention means first to cleanse and purify our motivation, or to put it differently, to make sure that we do what we do purely for the sake of Allah and not for any other worldly purpose or objective.”

Dr. Rif'at Fawzi, Professor of Shari'ah at Cairo University states²: “It is sufficient to make intention in one's heart. In other words, the fasting person is not required to express his intention to fast in explicit words. Everyone who knows that tomorrow is one of the days of Ramadan and wills to fast, this is considered a valid intention even if he does not express the intention to fast in explicit words. Also, when one gets up to take *suhur* (pre-dawn meal) or even intends to get up but was overcome by sleep, this is considered a valid intention to fast.”

It is recommended that the niyyat be made before dawn of the day the Ramadan fast is being kept. According to the Hanafi School, the niyyat may be made at any time before mid-day. According to Imams Shafi, Hanbal and Malik it is wajib for the niyyat of a Ramadan fast to be made before dawn.

The niyyat confirms one's intention. It does not have to be in any particular format and can be said in any language.

Should the niyyat/intention be said each day?

Under Hanafi law, you are required to make your intention on a daily basis. In his response to a question on this issue, Dr. Ahmad Taha Rayan, Professor of Comparative Jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, states³:

“The Shafi'is, Hanafis and a group of Hanbali jurists...are of the opinion that one has...to make the intention to fast for each day of Ramadan separately. They gave as reasoning for their point of view that fasting each day of Ramadan is a separate deed

of its own. If one has forgotten to make the intention to fast a day in the preceding night until the dawn has come, one is to continue fasting the day but is to make up for it later.

“They cite also as evidence of their view in that regard the hadith reported on the authority of Hafsa, (may Allah be pleased with her), that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: “He who has not made the intention to fast a day in the preceding night his fast is invalid.” There is also another hadith reported on the authority of `A’ishah, (may Allah be pleased with her), that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: “He who has not made the intention to fast a day before the dawn his fast is invalid.”

Suhur (Sehri)

Suhur is the act of arising from sleep during the course of the night to partake of some food or drink in anticipation of a fast.

Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi explains suhur: “*Suhur* is not a condition for fasting; it is *sunnah*. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) partook of *suhur* and encouraged others to do it. He said: “**Take *suhur*, for verily there is a blessing in *suhur*.**” *Suhur* is a *sunnah* and to delay it is also a *sunnah*. This is what will strengthen the fasting Muslim, and would lessen the hardship of fasting. It would also lessen the time period of thirst and hunger.

“It is a *sunnah* for the fasting Muslim to get up for *suhur* and have something to eat, even if he or she would take a small edible thing like a date or a sip of water. If he or she does this, he or she would have done fulfilled the *sunnah* of the Prophet (PBUH).”

When should one awake for suhur?

Suhur should take place just prior to the Fajr prayer.

Narrated Anas: Zaid bin Thabit said, “We took the Suhur with the Prophet. Then he stood for the prayer.” I asked, “What was the interval between the Suhur and the Adhan?” He replied, “The interval was sufficient to recite fifty verses of the Quran.” (Bukhari, volume 3, Hadith number 144).

It is Sunnah to delay the suhur for as long as possible. “The preferred time to stop eating is ten minutes before Fajr time. However, the permitted time for *suhur* can extend up to the time of Fajr.” (Sheikh Kutty⁴).

2. Breaking a fast (Iftar)

The Sunnah is to break the fast as soon as the sun has set - the Prophet (PBUH) always broke his fast as soon as he ascertained the sun had set. He (PBUH) said, “When night falls from this side and the day vanishes from this side and the sun sets, then the fasting person should break his fast.” (Bukhari, volume 3, Hadith number 175).

The Prophet (PBUH)’s Sunnah is to hasten to break the fast as soon as the sun has set – to delay the breaking of the fast is contrary to the Sunnah. Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet (PBUH) said: Allah, the Lord of honour and glory, says: “Of my servants I love most those are foremost in breaking their fasts.” (Mishkat).

One need not wait for the Adhaan (call for prayer) of the Magrib prayer to commence or end prior to eating – if the sun has set, the fast should be broken.

Before breaking the fast, a person should use whatever means available to ensure that the sun has indeed set. In cities, the use of timetables greatly assists in this regard.

Intention to break fast:

At the time of Iftar it is Sunnah to break the fast with a dua (supplication). In his well-known book, *Fiqh As-Sunnah*, the late Sheikh Sayyed Sabiq states⁵:

“Ibn Majah reported from `Abdullah ibn `Amr ibn al-`Aas that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: **"A fasting person, upon breaking his fast, has a supplication that will not be rejected."** When `Abdullah broke his fast he would say: "O Allah, I ask of You, by Your mercy that encompasses everything, to forgive me.

“It is confirmed that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) would say: **"The thirst has gone, the veins become wet and, Allah willing, the reward is confirmed."**

“In another (*mursal*) narration, it is reported that he (peace and blessings be upon him) would say: **"O Allah, for You I have fasted and with Your provisions do I break my fast."**

“At-Tirmidhi reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: **"Three people will not have their supplications rejected: a fasting person until he breaks his fast, a just ruler, and an oppressed person."**

A common dua is:

“O Allah! I have fasted for You. I believe in You. I have trust in You and I make Iftar with the rizq (food) provided by You.”

What to eat:

A fast can be terminated with any permissible food or drink. The Prophet (PBUH) recommended that a fast be broken with dates or water.

Narrated Salman ibn Amir: The Prophet (PBUH) said, “When one of you is fasting, he should break his fast with dates; but if he cannot get any, then (he should break his fast) with water, for water is purifying.” (Abu Dawud).

Nutritional Value of Dates

By Karima Burns, MH, ND

“The nutritional value of the relatively easy-to-store date fruit is high in sugar - comprising up to 70% of the fruit. (In most varieties the sugar component consists of glucose and fructose.) Dates are also good sources of iron, potassium (150mg in 100g), magnesium (important for use of voluntary muscles), sulphur, copper, calcium and phosphorus (important in building muscles and neuro-tissues), along with various vitamins, including thiamine, riboflavin, biotin, folic and ascorbic acid. Water is 13.8% and proteins are about 3%.

One kilogram of dates gives the body 3470 calories shortly after eating it. This energy will satisfy your appetite, which is very important especially while breaking your fasting.”

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⁴ When a Fasting Person Should Stop Eating – Islamonline – 8 November 2003

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