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Ramadan 2016: How the fast can help your health

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Some research suggests that fasting not only has spiritual benefits but physical ones as well.

Millions of Muslims around the world are observing their annual spiritual fast, steering clear of daylight eating, drinking and smoking. Those celebrating the holy month of Ramadan this year, which started last week, must not eat any food, drink any liquid, smoke or have sex between dawn and dusk.

Fasting can be risky – it can cause daytime fatigue, headaches and weakness – so the elderly, the very young, the sick and pregnant women are exempt. But, research has shown the practice has some wide-ranging health benefits too – if done right.

Want to come out of your fast with a rejuvenated spirit as well a healthier body? Read these science-backed tips:

Lose weight

It goes without saying that [weight loss \(http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FPHN%2FPHN17_02%2FS1368980012005046a.pdf&code=3ae4ffabb6c285de01f7ea49a2a202](http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FPHN%2FPHN17_02%2FS1368980012005046a.pdf&code=3ae4ffabb6c285de01f7ea49a2a202) is far from being the point of Ramadan. But because eating is only permitted after dark, many people consume less food in a day than they would usually, and so they do lose weight. According to a 2012 study in the medical journal *Public Health Nutrition*, people lose an average of 1.24 kg by the end of Ramadan. Men are more likely to lose weight during the fast than women, which might be explained by the fact that women eat normally during the days of their menstrual cycle.

Weight loss has many benefits, especially for obese people, including lowering the risk of heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure. But the research shows most people regain the lost weight in only two weeks after ending the fast.

The authors note that the month provides an opportunity to start losing weight but “structured and consistent lifestyle modifications are necessary to achieve life-lasting weight loss”.

Prevent headaches

Fasting can increase your chances of experiencing headaches, according to a 2009 literature review published in the medical journal *Headache*. The researchers found many possible causes for this, including caffeine withdrawal, low blood sugar and dehydration.

Elliot Shevel, a migraine expert who heads up The Headache Clinic – a private group of specialised facilities in South Africa – says there are ways to [prevent head pain \(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19472450\)](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19472450) associated with foregoing caffeine during a Ramadan fast. “Patients can often prevent headaches by reducing caffeine consumption in the weeks leading up to their fast.”

He says another strategy to prevent caffeine withdrawal would be to have one very strong cup of coffee before the start of the fast each day.

Quit smoking

Ramadan has been used by a number of public health authorities to encourage smokers to quit the habit (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2011.03432.x/epdf>) as they are forced to abstain from tobacco each day of the holy month. Regular smokers will experience withdrawal symptoms such as mood swings, anxiety, headaches, nausea and fatigue, according to a 2011 article in the journal *Addiction*. The article explains that if smokers continue to use tobacco in the evening hours the Ramadan period will likely be an uncomfortable experience.

But if they maintain their abstinence day and night, withdrawal symptoms will subside in time. They say “the prohibition against smoking during the day and the absence of other smoking could assist the quit attempt”, making the holy month a good catalyst for nicotine addicts wanting to stop the habit. It might be a good time to kick other bad habits as well, including drinking alcohol and caffeine.

Live longer

Recent research has strengthened the connection between eating less and ageing (<http://www.cell.com/cell-metabolism/abstract/S1550-4131%2815%2900224-7>), although many of the studies are based on animals such as mice and monkeys. A 2015 pilot study on humans conducted by University of Southern California researchers found a wide range of health benefits in patients who adopted a diet that mimics the effects of fasting.

Fasting for five days for three consecutive months decreased risk factors for ageing, heart disease and cancer. But the study is small, using data from 19 subjects, so more research is needed to confirm these positive links. The study also noted that benefits were noticed when people cut their normal food intake by a third to a half while fasting and if they followed a balanced diet.

Ramadan

74
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