



Ramadan and Diabetes

Answers to common questions

Adapted from information by the Joslin Diabetes Centre and Diabetes Australia

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Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan is an important spiritual practice. When you have diabetes, you may be wondering how fasting will affect your diabetes. There is a lot of misinformation about diabetes and Ramadan. This handout is written to answer some of the most common questions.

Does everyone have to fast?

No. This is based on the Holy Quran as well as the teachings of Islamic religious scholars over centuries.

The Quran states that there are groups of people who do not have to fast, especially if it puts their health at risk. This includes children, pregnant or breastfeeding women, the elderly and anyone who might make themselves ill by fasting.

This also includes people with poorly controlled diabetes, people with type 1, people with type 2 who take insulin, and those who often have very high or very low blood glucose levels.

I know many people with diabetes who fast and don't have a problem. Is it okay for me?

It is true, many people with diabetes can fast safely, but each person is different. Part of the decision you will make with your doctor has to do with the kind of diabetes medicine you take.

It is important to schedule an appointment two to three months before Ramadan to discuss how fasting might affect your diabetes. Your doctor or healthcare provider may suggest a change in your medication plan.

What risks should I be aware of?

- Low blood glucose (or *hypoglycaemia*) – Limit your physical activity during fasting hours and be more active after sunset when you have eaten. Talk with your healthcare provider to find out if your medicine puts you at risk for low blood glucose and discuss how to prevent it.
- High blood glucose (or *hyperglycaemia*) – While low blood glucose levels may happen during the day, after the fast is broken, there is a greater risk to overeat. Watch out for eating too many sweets and keep the portion sizes moderate. Even though Ramadan is known as a time of fasting – it is not uncommon for people to gain weight during this month, as in some families, every evening meal is a celebration.
- Dehydration – Drink plenty of water and decaffeinated drinks frequently throughout the evening and before dawn.

I was told to not check my blood glucose during the day as it will break the fast. Is that true?

Checking blood glucose will not break a fast! It is important to monitor blood glucose levels especially to identify a low glucose level. Fasting will have to end if your glucose level falls below 4mmol/L.

How is low blood glucose treated?

Step 1: If glucose levels fall below 4mmol/L, treat with one of the following choices:

- 120ml of a sugary drink like normal lemonade or fruit juice
- cup of tea or coffee with three spoons of sugar
- 3 glucose tablets

Step 2: Wait 15 minutes and check your blood glucose again. Usually this is enough to increase your blood glucose level.

If your blood glucose has increased, eat a snack if the evening meal is more than an hour away. Try a snack containing a longer acting carbohydrate such as bread, a sandwich, fruit, a glass of milk or a tub of yogurt.

If your blood glucose has not increased, repeat Step 1 and 2. If this still does not increase your blood glucose level, call an ambulance on Triple Zero (000).

Do I stop taking medicine during Ramadan?

No. You continue taking your diabetes medicine, but you will take it at different times. Your dose may also change.

This is one reason why it is very important to talk with your healthcare provider several months before Ramadan so you can plan ahead for how your diabetes medicines may need to change.

How do I plan my meals since I'm only eating twice a day?

The dawn meal (Suhoor) should contain a balance of whole grain sources of longer acting carbohydrates as well as some protein and fat to help slow the digestion and help the feeling of fullness last as long as possible into the day.

Healthy breakfast options good for the month of Ramadan include:

- wholegrain cereal and low-fat milk, followed by cottage cheese with fruit and toasted almonds
- low fat yogurt with fruit, followed by whole wheat toast with nut butter
- fowl (a hearty middle eastern breakfast dish made of lentils or fava beans), small serving of sliced fruit
- whole wheat roti (unleavened bread) and egg khagina (a southeast Asian dish).

Note: Fruit can be fresh, frozen, stewed (without added sugar), canned (in light juice, not syrup) or dried. The best choices for bread and toast are whole wheat, multi-grain or sour dough.

Traditionally the fast is broken (Iftar) after sunset and begins with the eating of dates and drinking water. Limit dates to one or two each evening. Drink plenty of water and sugar free beverages throughout the evening.

While the iftar meal is a celebration time, aim to not overeat. Discuss a plan with your doctor or health professional.

Keep sensible portions in mind and follow the same guidelines for healthy eating that you do the rest of the year with an emphasis on whole grains, lean sources of meat, fish and poultry, small amounts of heart healthy fats and limit added sugars.