

Guide to Healthy Fasting

Don't break your fast with a feast or you may put on weight instead of losing it.

If you are not careful, food eaten during the pre-dawn and dusk meals can cause some weight gain.

Dr Razeen Mahroof, an anaesthetist from Oxford, says feasting during the non-fasting hours can be unhealthy. He says you need to approach the fast with discipline, or the opportunity to lose weight and be healthier will be wasted.

“The underlying message behind Ramadan is self-discipline and self-control,” he says. “This shouldn't fall apart at the end of the day”.

Balanced diet

Those observing the fast should have at least two meals a day, the pre-dawn meal (Suhoor) and a meal at dusk (Iftar).

Dr Mahroof says your food intake should be simple and not differ too much from your normal diet. It should contain foods from all the major food groups:

- Fruit and vegetables.
- Bread, other cereals and potatoes.
- Meat, fish and alternatives.
- Milk and dairy foods.
- Foods containing fat and sugar.

Complex carbohydrates are foods that help release energy slowly during the long hours of fasting. They are found in grains and seeds, like barley, wheat, oats, millets, semolina, beans, lentils, wholemeal flour and basmati rice.

Fibre-rich foods are also digested slowly and include bran, cereals, whole wheat, grains and seeds, potatoes with the skin, vegetables such as green beans and almost all fruit, including apricots, prunes and figs.

Foods to avoid are the heavily-processed, fast-burning foods that contain refined carbohydrates (sugar and white flour), as well as fatty food (for example, cakes, biscuits, chocolates and sweets such as Indian Mithai).

It's also worth avoiding caffeine-based drinks such as tea, coffee and cola. Caffeine is a diuretic and stimulates faster water loss through urination.

Wholesome foods

Suhoor, the pre-dawn meal, should be a wholesome, moderate meal that is filling and provides enough energy for many hours.

“Suhoor should be light and include slow digesting food like pitta bread, salad, cereal (especially oats) or toast so that you have a constant release of energy,” Dr Mahroof says.

“It’s important to have some fluids with vitamins, such as fruit juice or fruit. Some people have isotonic drinks (such as Lucozade) to replace any lost salts.”

It’s customary for Muslims to break the fast (Iftar) with some dates, in accordance with the Prophetic traditions.

Dates will provide a burst of energy. Fruit juices will also have a similar, revitalising effect. Start by drinking plenty of water, which helps rehydration and reduces the chances of over indulgence. Avoid the rich, special dishes that traditionally celebrate the fast.

Foods to avoid

- Deep-fried foods, for example pakoras, samosas and fried dumplings.
- High-sugar and high-fat foods, including sweets such as Gulab Jamun, Rasgulla, Balushahi and Baklava.
- High-fat cooked foods, for example, parathas, oily curries and greasy pastries.

Healthy alternatives

- Wholegrains, such as chickpeas (plain or with potato in yogurt with different Indian spices), samosas (baked instead of fried), and boiled dumplings.
- Chapattis made without oil, baked or grilled meat and chicken. Make pastry at home and use a single layer.
- Milk-based sweets and puddings such as Rasmalai and Barfee.

Cooking methods to avoid

- Deep frying.
- Frying.
- Curries with excessive oil.

Healthy cooking methods

- Shallow frying (usually there is little difference in taste).
- Grilling or baking is healthier and helps retain the taste and original flavour of the food, especially with chicken and fish.