

Mastering fast with smart nutrition for a fulfilling holy month

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RAMADAN holds deep spiritual significance for Muslims and the most visible practice is abstaining from all food and beverages from sunrise to sunset for a month. In Kuala Lumpur, Ramadan rhythms include waking up around 5am to eat *sahur*. In Malaysia's easternmost town, Tawau, that means waking up at about 4am. This is followed by 13 to 14 hours without food or drink until sunset at about 7.30 in the evening. Of course, if we are in Tawau, we get to break our fast at about 6.30 in the evening.

Mastering fasting is not about "enduring" hunger; Ramadan is not a competition to see who can last longer without food and water. By applying smart nutrition strategies, we can transform Ramadan from a month of physical exhaustion into one of metabolic and spiritual rejuvenation.

First, the science

The first sign occurs about 8 hours after going without food. Our liver runs out of glucose and our body switches to using stored fat for energy. In a healthy body, we have that metabolic flexibility. However, individuals with metabolic syndrome, such as diabetes, should consult their physician before fasting during Ramadan. It is possible to fast, but a physician would advise medication adjustments on a case-by-case basis. If the blood sugar level drops to a dangerous level, that fast should be broken immediately to avoid life-threatening complications. Everyone can benefit from reducing salt intake, as high sodium causes the body to retain water, which increases blood pressure and the feeling of thirst during the day.

Sahur matters

Sahur is the most critical meal of the month, yet it is the one most frequently skipped. Friends tell each other that they will have *sahur* with plain water only, three dates only or milk only. Whilst plain water, dates and milk are good, they do not provide a nutritious meal to sustain the fast. Some people have white rice or bread with an egg or the previous evening's leftover dishes. White rice is digested quickly. We want a complex carbohydrate source that the body can absorb glucose.

For a start, swap white rice for brown rice. Eat rice with a combination of protein sources, vegetables and fruits. Lean animal proteins, such as eggs, lean chicken and fish and plant proteins, such as *tempeh* and *tauhu*, provide satiety and help prevent muscle breakdown. Alternatively, try overnight-soaked oats with sliced bananas and a handful of favourite nuts. Oats contain beta-glucan, a fibre that slows the absorption of glucose. All these changes keep us feeling full for longer.

Breaking fast with intent

What we break our fast with matters! Muslims prefer to break fast with dates as it is *Sunnah*, that is, following the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. One to three dates provide a quick burst of energy in the form of fructose. Potassium in the dates quickly rebalances electrolytes. Then come thoughts on the meal that follows.

If one is already thinking of plenty of *sirap bandung*, *tepung pelita* and *bubur cha cha*, followed by *martabak*, *roti John* and *bubur lambuk* for *buka puasa* or *iftar*, we are looking at an immediate glucose spike. Whilst it might



satisfy the craving, these high-sugar and high-carbohydrate choices lead to a rapid insulin surge, followed by a 'crash' that leaves one exhausted during *tarawih* prayers. Many people have another session of plentiful food after *tarawih*, with mosques providing free *moreh*. *Moreh* was a light supper in the past. Today, it has evolved into a feast featuring a spread of food that mirrors an *iftar* 2.0, about 2 to 3 hours after *iftar* 1.0. To reset, let's think of "mindful moderation".

Our Malaysian Quarter-Quarter-Half Healthy Plate remains the gold standard for *iftar*. Imagine an *iftar* plate consisting of a quarter plate of grilled fish, steamed chicken or a *tempeh*-anchovies-peanut combo. In another quarter, a small portion of rice, preferably brown, or noodles. In the half portion of the plate, fill it up with *ulam* and fruits. The key word is moderation: Lean proteins, carbohydrates with more fibre, fruits and vegetables. Suppose you must have *kuih*, limit to one or two pieces and have less rice. Hydrate with a glass of chilled plain water or a sugar-free fruit-infused water. Reboot Ramadan fast by ditching the sugary cordials.

Hydration strategy

In our tropical heat, our challenge is more often thirst rather than hunger. Drinking a litre of water at *imsak*, just before the fast begins, is not helpful. Our body cannot absorb it all at once and we simply flush it out as urine. Use this rule: 2-4-2. Two glasses of plain water during *sahur*, 4 glasses between *Maghrib* and sleep and 2 glasses during *iftar*. Avoid excessive tea and coffee, as they contain caffeine, a diuretic that can increase fluid loss throughout the day. Coffee drinkers might wish to plan their coffee intake to avoid a caffeine withdrawal headache and excessive fluid loss during the day.

Spiritual – Nutritional connection

By choosing balanced, nutrient-dense meals and avoiding overconsumption during *iftar* and *moreh*, we are providing our bodies with the physical stamina for the *tarawih* prayers, nightly worship and daily productivity. The many rakaats of prayers during the nightly worship contribute to physical activity. Other

physical activities, like light walking, are also good. This Ramadan, let us move away from the feasting after fasting. Let us embrace the rhythm of slow energy, adequate hydration and mindful portions.



Balanced nutrition supports focus and endurance during nightly worship.



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Breaking fast with dates provides quick energy and helps rebalance electrolytes.

Mastering the fast

- Never skip *sahur*
- Hydrate in increments
- Prioritise fibre
- Move gently