

Fasting during the month of Ramadhan

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Hussein al-Hussein

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Authors(s):

[Hussein al-Hussein](#) [2]

A unique moral and spiritual characteristic of Islam is the prescribed institution of Fasting or Siyam in Arabic. Literally defined, fasting means to abstain completely from foods, drinks, sex, and smoking, before break of the dawn till sunset, during the entire lunar month of Ramadhan, the ninth month of the Islamic year.

Fasting Ramadhan is one of the five pillars of Islam. A fasting Muslim will usually eat a meal right after sunset called Iftar, which means breakfast, and another light meal right before dawn called Sahur.

Recommended during this month is also a nightly prayer called At-Tarawih or Al-Qiyam. Most Muslims do this prayer in a group in the Mosque.

Muslims have more dinner invitations during the month of Ramadhan than they have during the year. The poor and the needy are among the first to be invited to such dinners.

Some people are exempted from fasting and are required to make up for the days they do not fast such as sick people, traveling people, and those who reach a harmful level of thirst or hunger. Other people are exempted from fasting and are required to feed a poor person for each day they do not fast such as the elderly people, and those who have permanent diseases like ulcer and diabetes.

Pregnant women and women who are nursing babies may either make up for the fasting days they miss or feed a poor person for each fasting day they miss. The last category are those who should not fast but are required to make up for the days they do not fast, and those are women during the period of menstruation and women during the period of confinement (after giving birth). Children are not required to fast but are encouraged to do so. Besides being a worship to Allah, fasting has many benefits.

Some of benefits of Ramadhan are spiritual such as teaching the principle of sincere love to Allah, strengthening the relationship between the human being and the creator, discipline, patience, and unselfishness.

Other benefits are material ones because it is a good diet system and the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be with him) said to the Muslims: "Fast and you will be healthier". This healthier status would not be attained if one ate too much at the time of breaking the fast after sunset.

That is why Muslims start by eating something easy to digest such as dates and milk, then they pray the prayer that follows sunset, Maghrib prayer, and after that they come back and eat their breakfast. This

way, one would only eat what is needed instead of eating unneeded amount of food at the moment of breaking the fast. People also get to appreciate food more in Ramadhan and remember to be grateful to Allah for His bounties on them.

Muslims also remember the poor and needy more during the month of Ramadhan by paying the poor due of this month called Sadaqatul Fitr, and by inviting them to meals. Many Muslims also confine themselves to the mosque during the last ten days of Ramadhan as a devotion to worshipping Allah. They eat, sleep, and pray in the mosque.

Muslims are told to observe a special night during the last ten nights of Ramadhan called Laylatul Qadr, which the Qur'an says is better than a thousand months. It is not certain which night it is; hence, Muslims increase the prayers during the last ten nights to make sure that they do not miss the virtues of this special night.

After Ramadhan, Muslims celebrate the feast of breakfasting called Eidul Fitr, one of the two major Muslim holidays besides the Pilgrimage one, Eidul Adh-ha. Muslims gather in groups in the early morning of the feast after sunrise for a congregational prayer, Salatul Eid, and to salute each other by saying to each other "May Allah accept from us and you".

Since Ramadhan is a lunar month, it rotates around the year and falls in all the possible seasons over a period of 35 years. This way, wherever you live around the globe, you will get to fast during all the possible seasons instead of fasting only long summer days or only short winter days.

People living close to the earth poles may either fast an equal number of hours to those fasted everyday by Muslims in Mecca and Madina, or in the closest community to them on the same longitude with a reasonable daytime. Non-Muslims are always welcome to attend such Muslim activities to learn about Islam and Muslims. This month offers a great deal of interesting activities that I encourage non-Muslims to come to whether they are held in mosques or in parks.

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