

# What are the benefits of fasting and of Ramadan?

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## Abstract

There has been increased popularity of fasting as a lifestyle choice and a way of losing weight. Overall, fasting results in significant health benefits. Fasting during Ramadan (i.e. religious fasting) leads to additional benefits.

**Keywords:** Fasting, Ramadan

## Introduction

Obesity is on the rise. In the UK 38% of people are overweight and 26% are obese(i). Obesity is defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or above. Overweight is a BMI between 25 and 30. In South-Asians the criteria is stricter with values as low as 23.9 for being obese and 19.2 for being overweight. This means this group are also more likely to get diabetes as there is a direct correlation between an abnormal BMI and the risk of developing metabolic derangements such as type 2 diabetes(ii).

Fasting usually pertains to the restriction of the intake of solid foods, and has been undertaken in various forms throughout the world over time.

## Ramadan

The month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is observed by millions of Muslims around the globe. Although the predominant act of worship in the month is that of fasting, Muslims undertake various other acts of worship throughout this month, including extra prayers and increase in charity.

In Islam, Muslims have been ordained to fast in the month of Ramadan. This is abstaining from food and drink in the daylight hours. Fasting is from the pre-dawn until sundown and in northern hemispheres can be around 18 hours in the summer. The purpose of fasting is to become more conscious of God. This is known as taqwa. In the Quran, Allah says “O you who believe, the fasts have been enjoined upon you as they were enjoined upon those before you, so that you may have taqwa”(iii). There is no equivalent English word for taqwa but it means a state of consciousness where the presence of the Creator is constantly felt.

There are other aspects of Ramadan to consider and how they may impact health. The first one is that in Ramadan the Muslim community tends to be more sociable. There is a common practice to invite friends and family to open the fast and eat together (the opening of the fast is called iftar). Some Muslim communities will open their doors to all faith groups and have community iftars which are often free to enable community cohesion and build upon interfaith dialogues.

The benefits of a good social network have been well documented. There is evidence to show that social support can improve physical health including improved outcomes in cancer sufferers(iv). Conversely, many studies have suggested that loneliness can have a negative impact on health and well-being (v,vi).

Having someone to call on you in ill health can mean a great deal when you're not feeling well. Interestingly, this is something that is actively encouraged in the Muslim faith. There is a saying of the Prophet (hadith) on this: “When a Muslim visits a sick Muslim at dawn, seventy thousand

angels keep on praying for him till dusk. If he visits him in the evening, seventy thousand angels keep on praying for him till the morning; and he will have (his share of) reaped fruits in Jannah”(vii).

Helping others whether that be financially or providing support to others, are strongly emphasized acts of worship in Islam and Muslims believe that all good actions are rewarded more in the month of Ramadan.

A recent study has shown that volunteering can improve one's immunity.

Volunteering and being charitable is known to have an impact on the community but has also been found to have positive mental and physical effects on the person(viii).

Not only has volunteering been linked to reduced functional decline, it has also been shown to reduce the risk of hypertension, cardiovascular disease and mortality(ix).

Several mechanisms have been hypothesized as to the reason behind this, including the impact of having a purpose for life, and increased life satisfaction.

### Intermittent fasting

Intermittent fasting (IF) is a way of losing weight with additional benefits that has become increasingly popular. We will look at the evidence to see if it actually works or if it is just the latest craze.

There are different types of IF. The main underlying concept is fasting or time-restricted feeding. This can be done with a fasting and eating window. The times can vary and are flexible. For example, 18:6 involves fasting for 18 hours a day and having an eating window of 6 hours. Most of the fasting window is during the night time. During the fasting window only water, black tea or coffee can be consumed. This is wet fasting and different from the fasting in Ramadan when nothing can enter the mouth, not even water.

Some people will gradually progress from 18:6 to one meal a day (OMAD) which means only consuming one meal in 24 hours.

Extended fasting (EF) is more intense with 36, 48, 60 or 72 hours of fasting.

With this type of fasting there is no calorie counting.

5:2 is another way of fasting whereby during two days out of 7, calories are restricted to 500 in 24 hours. These are spread out throughout the day so there is no eating or fasting window.

Fasting in the religion of Islam is not restricted to Ramadan and it was a practice of the Prophet to fast every Monday and Thursdays, which many Muslims now adopt. This has some similarities to the 5:2 diet.

## Fasting

There are many perceived benefits of fasting. It allows your gut to rest, improves concentration, reduces inflammation and can lead to better sleep(x, xi).

It can also promote autophagy whereby the body removes damaged cells. There have been claims that this can reduce the chances of getting cancer although more research is needed on this(xii).

The principle behind how IF can lead to weight loss is that overall less calories are consumed. In addition, during the fasting period, fat reserves are used. This effect is obviously exaggerated the longer the fasts. Also, if healthy foods are consumed in the eating window this will have more benefits and lead to increased weight loss. Similarly, the higher the BMI the more initial weight loss there will be although studies have found that IF has this benefit and others even in those who have a normal BMI(xiii).

Studies have shown that diets such as IF which involve restricting calories to a very low number don't lead to long term weight loss as they are not sustainable(xiv).

Also, fasting prevents insulin spikes so can reverse pre diabetes and reduce the risk of developing type two diabetes(xv).

Fasting has been shown to improve low-density lipoprotein cholesterol. The depletion of glycogen in hepatocytes means that lipids are utilized for energy production, hence fasting reduces blood lipid levels(xii).

Some studies have found that fasting can have a negative impact on mood, cause irritability and increase anger symptoms(xvi). However, there have been a few studies which suggest that fasting could also improve mood. The proposed difference could be in fact related to the reason for fasting, as religious fasting has been found to have a positive impact on mood(xvii). Furthermore, fasting has been suggested as a form of mood enhancer for those with chronic pain(xviii).

## Conclusion

Dietary fasting has increased in popularity for weight loss over the years. Many types of fasting have been advocated including alternate day fasting, and IF in which there is a time restricted calorie intake.

The act of fasting has been studied extensively with many medical benefits including weight loss and improved glycemic control. Fasting carried out for religious reasons results in additional benefits.

## Abbreviations

BMI: Body Mass Index  
IF: Intermittent Fasting  
OMAD: One Meal A Day  
EF: Extended Fasting

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