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## Nutrition Tips for Ramadan Fasting

Muslims around the world observing the Ramadan fast this month are now at the halfway mark. There's no food or drink in daylight hours during the annual ritual.

For Aysha Sidiqi, Ramadan isn't just a religious obligation. It's a critical month to reflect on her good fortune, her family and her community, according to the Lakeridge Health registered dietitian.

Sidiqi and Cleveland Clinic Canada registered dietitian Jennifer Sygo offer their tips on what to eat and what to avoid as Muslims complete the final stretch of Ramadan.

### **DO: Break your fast carefully and with lighter dishes**

When she's breaking fast in the evenings at *iftar*, Sidiqi makes sure she paces herself. She starts with a glass of water, and some dates, which are commonly eaten during Ramadan. They're high in sugar so they're fast-acting carbohydrates but they're also packed with magnesium, potassium and fibre. Then it's all about lighter fare, such as salads, soups and yogurt.

### **DO: Reach for the fruits and vegetables that'll help with hydration**

Sidiqi makes sure her soups and salads are made with vegetables that are packed with high water content. Cucumbers, lettuce, zucchini, radish and celery are prime candidates, but cauliflower, eggplant, red cabbage and peppers are also safe bets.

Fruits include watermelon, strawberries, grapefruit, cantaloupe and peaches.

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This part of your meal will help you stay hydrated while restoring electrolytes, vitamins and minerals. Usually half of her plate includes fruits and vegetables, Sidiqi said.

### **DON'T: Skip breakfast.**

You may be tempted to snooze instead of waking up for your pre-dawn meal, but the experts advise you against that. These days, the pre-dawn meal – called *suhour*– is typically just after 4 a.m., according to Sidiqi. Don't skip it.

She typically makes oatmeal with almonds and milk along with some eggs for protein. Then she grazes on blueberries and other fruits. And if you're awake during the night, it's okay to snack on cereal or even make a sandwich, she suggested.

### **DON'T: Overindulge on carbohydrates. Balance the complex and simple carbs.**

Carbohydrates are tricky – complex carbohydrates such as lentils, beans, quinoa, brown rice, and whole wheat pasta are released slowly, making you feel satiated for a longer period of time. Simple carbohydrates, such as white bread, fruit juice, chocolate bars, and other packaged goods, will make you hungry sooner.

Be savvy and think about which carbs you reach for, Sygo said. If it's in the evening and you're breaking fast, simple carbohydrates will digest quickly and help your body to recover.

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“It tends to leave you feeling hungrier, so it could encourage you to eat more,” Sygo said. On the other hand, if you’re filling up on beans and brown rice right away, you might not want to eat for the rest of the night.

“The average person is trying to get the better part of a whole day’s food into just a few hours. You want your meal to digest quickly so you’ll sleep comfortably, too,” Sygo added.

So don’t shy away from white breads and a starch in the evening if that’s what you’re craving. But at your pre-dawn meal, make sure your carbohydrates give you fuel for the day.

### **DON’T: Forget to eat protein.**

Protein is the building block needed to help with building and maintaining muscle and tissue in our bodies. It also helps us to feel full, Sygo said.

Each of your meals should come with protein: at *iftar*, it’s chicken breast or fish, along with some leafy greens for fibre for Sidiqi. At *suhoor*, she prepares eggs, oatmeal with milk and almonds.

### **DO: Watch what you drink.**

Staying hydrated is key when you’re fasting in the summer months. Men, on average, need to drink about three litres of water — or 13 cups — while women need to consume about 2.2 litres, or nine cups a day.

Sidiqi always breaks her fast with a glass of water, and drinks about two to three large glasses of water at her evening and pre-dawn meals.

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During Ramadan, she stays away from caffeinated drinks, sugary sodas and any food packed with sodium, such as cold cut meats, chips and salted nuts, for example.

Some people might even keep a jug of water at their bedside so they can have another glass or two during the night.

**DO: Fast only if you're healthy.**

Pregnant women, nursing mothers and those who are ill are exempt from fasting, according to the Qur'an.

That also extends to children, and seniors or adults who have health problems or rely on oral medication that they need to take during the day.

Those who are too sick to fast at all can compensate by paying what's called "fidah" — the equivalent of about \$10 a day to help feed the poor.