

R A M A D A N

A simple guide

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the name of the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. During this month, Muslims engage in the ritual of fasting (*sawm* in Arabic).

Ramadan is a very holy month for Muslims. During this time, believers strive to devote themselves to worship, reflection, perfection of their character and increasing in God-consciousness.

When is Ramadan?

The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, and the birth of a new crescent moon heralds the start of the month. The lunar year is approximately 10 days shorter than the solar year. As a result, the month of Ramadan starts 10 days earlier each year on the Gregorian solar calendar we follow in Australia. This sees Ramadan rotate to a different month every couple of years.

What is fasting?

Fasting in Islam means staying away from eating, drinking (even water) and intimate relations between spouses from dawn (*fajr*) to sunset (*maghrib*).

Relieved of these basic human needs for a restricted period of time, the believer instead focuses on their spiritual development. Muslims also focus on increasing their acts of worship, prayers, good deeds, giving charity and strengthening family and community bonds in Ramadan.

This is why for individual Muslims and their community at large, Ramadan is a time for inner reflection and renewal, exercising self-control and patience as well as engaging in gratitude and forgiveness. It is a perfect opportunity to connect and deepen one's connection with God.

Why do Muslims fast?

Fasting is the fourth Pillar of Islam and is an act of worship practiced by millions of Muslims around the world of all nationalities, backgrounds and walks of life.

Muslims believe fasting was mandated by God in the Holy Qur'an. *"O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may gain piety"*

- The Qur'an, Chapter 2 Verse 183 -

Muslims believe the Qur'an is the literal word of God (*Allah* in Arabic) transmitted to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the Angel Gabriel over 1400 years ago. The Qur'an was the last of the heavenly books to be revealed, following a great chain that included the Psalms, the Torah and the Gospel. In fact, one reason that the month of Ramadan is so special is that the first revelation of the Qur'an began in this holy month.

Does everyone have to fast?

All healthy adults are required to fast.

Sick persons, travellers, children and women during the menses and post-natal periods are not required to fast. Pregnant and breastfeeding women may also be excused if there is fear of harm to themselves or their baby.

What does fasting achieve?

First and foremost, fasting is a mandated act of worship. It is carried out by Muslims as an act of obedience to God, in hopes of attaining His reward.

Fasting requires resilience, perseverance and a strong will. Muslims fast out of love to God, and are comforted by the spiritual connection that fasting nurtures. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) tells Muslims:

"..For the fasting person there are two times of joy; a time of joy when they break their fast and a time of joy when they meet their Lord".

There are also various personal, lifestyle and communal benefits associated with fasting. These include the improvement of will and self-control, cleansing the body from toxins and gaining an appreciation of the struggles that the poor go through.

A typical day in Ramadan

A typical day for a fasting person in Ramadan starts by waking up before dawn to eat a pre-dawn meal called *suhoor*. It is encouraged to have healthy, nutritional meals and plenty of fluids. The beginning of the fasting day is marked by the call to prayer (*athan*). Once this is heard, Muslims stop eating and drinking and perform the dawn (*fajr*) prayer. Fasting has officially begun.

During the fasting day, Muslims will go about their usual activities. Muslims feel that their day can, in fact, become more productive without the need for lunch breaks. They try to dedicate more time towards increasing acts of worship and striving for good deeds that would reap spiritual benefits.

When the sun begins to set, Muslims conclude their fasting day with a meal known as the *iftar*. The fast is traditionally broken with the consumption of dates and water. Muslims will then pray *salat al-maghrib* (sunset prayer) before continuing with other activities like dinner with family, friends, neighbours and relatives.

In the evening, Muslims go to the mosque (*masjid*) to attend special prayers called *taraweeh*. Muslims can also perform these prayers at home. During the course of this prayer, passages from the Qur'an are recited and communal invocations are made.

Muslims ensure that during Ramadan they reconnect with God, their inner selves, their families, relatives, communities and society at large. A fasting person's time during Ramadan would specifically be allocated towards achieving these aims.

A very special night

One of the most special nights in the Islamic calendar occurs during the last ten days of the month of Ramadan. This night is known as *Laylatul Qadr*: The night of power, or decree.

Muslims believe that *Laylatul Qadr* holds a special connection in the communication between heavenly and earthly realms, as it marks the night that Qur'an was first revealed. On this special night, Muslims believe that the Angels descend, the night fills with peace and tranquillity and worship is rewarded abundantly. Many Muslims will 'step up' their worship towards the end of Ramadan, and especially so for this night. They will engage in nightlong worship, prayer, supplications and invocations, hoping for the reward promised in the Qur'an, which states that worship on this night is equivalent of 1000 months.

Being charitable

The third pillar of Islam is *Zakat*, or compulsory charity. The word *Zakat* in Arabic literally means 'purification' and 'growth'. The meaning is significant, as charity purifies a person's wealth and allows it to be blessed. The charity given is therefore more for the benefit of the giver, and they should be grateful that they are faced with the opportunity to share their wealth.

Muslims who meet a particular financial threshold are required to give 2.5% of their unused wealth to those in need. Many Muslims choose the month of Ramadan to fulfil this religious obligation.

Many Muslims choose to give more than this 2.5%, especially during Ramadan when it is believed that the rewards for good deeds are greatly increased. This extra, voluntary charity is called *sadaqa*, and it can consist of food, clothing and other goods or services.

Charity doesn't have to be in a tangible form. It can even consist of community service or spreading of good will. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) even said that greeting others with a smile is considered an act of charity!

Celebrating the end of Ramadan- Eid

The end of the fasting month is marked with the communal festival of *Eid-ul-fitr*, the festival of breaking the fast.

Muslims mark the occasion of Eid by decorating their homes, wearing their best clothes, attending outdoor or mosque prayer services and participating in joyful festivals.

Before the Eid prayer, *Zakat Al-Fitr* – an obligatory charity consisting of food but nowadays often given in money – should be distributed to the poor to ensure they are also included in the spirit of Eid.

The greeting that is often used during this time is "*Eid Mubarak*", meaning "blessed festival". Gifts are exchanged and celebratory food is joyfully shared after a month of physical and spiritual cleansing.

Getting involved in Ramadan

Muslims love to share the spirituality and significance of Ramadan with their non-Muslim family, friends, relatives and colleagues. If you would like to get involved in Ramadan:

- try fasting for a day and donate the money you save to your chosen charity
- try giving up a certain thing you enjoy to strengthen your self-control and perseverance
- join Muslims in breaking fast over the *iftar* meal
- observe Islamic prayers at the mosque
- get involved with Eid festivities
- exchange gifts with Muslims
- speak to fasting Muslims about their journey and experiences
- read blogs, articles, books and literature about the significance of Ramadan and its meaning to the global faith of Islam



Frequently Asked Questions

Is fasting harmful?

Fasting is not harmful to healthy adults. As mentioned earlier, there are many categories of people who are not required to fast for a variety of reasons.

Fasting has been practised for centuries across many cultures and religions. Done correctly, it is in fact one of the healthiest acts you can undertake for your body, giving it a break from constantly digesting food and granting it the opportunity to rest and repair.

What does someone do if they can't fast?

If someone falls under the category of persons excused from fasting, then in certain circumstances they will make up the days they missed once Ramadan is over. In other cases, if financially able, they will feed a poor person for every day of Ramadan.

Is fasting difficult?

For people new to fasting, first few days of adapting may be challenging. Heavy caffeine drinkers are strongly advised to wean themselves off it in the weeks leading up to Ramadan to avoid caffeine headaches during the fast. Some Muslims might also experience mild 'fasting headaches' on occasion; some days will be harder than others.

Generally, the most you will feel is a temporary hunger or thirst – a state that is not life threatening – which allows you to realise how many of the world's poor feel every day. In our society, we are surrounded by food and are used to instant gratification. During Ramadan, we learn to practice *sabr* (patience or persistence) and can experience a profound gratitude for a simple glass of water.

Do children have to fast?

No, it is not obligatory for children to fast. However, some may fast part of a day or a whole day occasionally in preparation for when they are older. There are, in fact, many children who fast the entire month. It is often something they choose to do, especially when the whole community around them is fasting.

Is it okay to eat around my Muslims friends and colleagues during Ramadan?

Muslims do not have an objection to people eating around them during Ramadan and will not impose fasting on others.

As mentioned, there are also people who are exempt from fasting and others who are in charge of preparing meals for the non-fasting, so they will be around food.

Some Ramadan Reflections...

"The Ramadan period provides a beautiful pause in everyday life, and is a lovely spiritual boost, much like Lent or Passover. It reminds me of my faith, and allows me to make it a priority, to reconnect with God. It reminds me of the importance of kindness, charity and humility. It is also like a reset button on any bad eating habits or behavioral patterns I may have fallen into. I'm never so at peace as I am during Ramadan" - A'isha

"Ramadan is a privilege we often take for granted! It is a priceless month where sins are forgiven and rewards are given in abundance!" - Serena

"Fasting is between me and God. If I were to cheat, no human would know, only God would. It's a close personal relationship directly with the One who created us" - Mariam

"Ramadan is a time for me to reflect on myself physically and spiritually to better myself for the long term" - Sara

"I love the spirit of Ramadan not just because of fasting. I love the fact that those who cannot fast have to pay for meals for a needy person as compensation." - Aarun

"I remember my first Ramadan. It was in the middle of a hot Aussie summer. Somehow, it was exhilarating. By the end of it, I felt this enormous sense of achievement. I never imagined what was possible, do-able. And I learned how to cook a few things." - Jools

"Ramadan is an incredible beautiful event in the world. You empty your stomach and open your pockets. It's not like other festivals or celebrations based on excess, it's about lightening and lessening your desires, not increasing them." - Ahmad

"Ramadan reminds me of times gone by. Like a long time ago. I think of Jesus fasting for 40 days as it was said in the Christian scriptures. Knowing fasting was practised by the previous Prophets, it's something I feel I share with them, it spans millennia, and I feel connected." - Aaliyah

