

## **Healthy eating during Ramadan**

Come Ramadan, our diets get radically altered. Our meals get condensed in mornings and evenings, with no intake in-between for an extended period of time. For some of us, the intake of oily foods skyrockets. These changes in our diets aren't well very received by our bodies.

In fact during Ramadan, our diets really should not differ very much from our normal diet and should be as simple as possible. For those of us who want to lose weight there is no time like Ramadan to shed those offending pounds.

Firstly our priority during Ramadan should be to maintain our energy levels and avoid the various maladies that we can suffer from if not well prepared.

Hence taking into account the fact that you will have to go without food for a good 12 hours, we need to be eating foods that have a low Glycaemic Index (GI). These are foods that are slow energy release foods like grains, seeds, barley, wheat, oats, semolina, beans, lentils, rice and hence last longest and keep us going longest. Slow digesting foods (complex carbohydrates) can last upto 8 hours whereas fast digesting foods (Refined Carbohydrates) are those containing white sugar and white flour last only 3-4 hours and are "Empty" calories.

Whole wheat, grains, seeds, vegetables (like green beans, peas, and spinach), fruit with skin, dried fruit (such as dried apricots, figs, prunes, and almonds) are all examples of low Glycaemic Index fibre-containing foods.

In addition to consisting of low GI items all our meals in Ramadan should be well-balanced, and they should contain foods from each food group, such as fruits, vegetables, meat/chicken/fish, bread/cereals and dairy products.

As far as fried foods are concerned : They are lethal and should be eliminated. They cause indigestion, heart-burn, and weight problems which cause further complications with heart diseases, cholesterol etc

### **Say No to:**

- Fried and fatty foods
- Foods containing too much sugar
- Over-eating especially at suhoor
- Too much tea at suhoor: Tea makes you pass more urine taking with it valuable mineral salts that your body would need during the day
- Smoking: If you cannot give up smoking, cut down gradually starting a few weeks before Ramadan.

## **Say Yes To:**

- Complex carbohydrates at iftar and suhoor so that the food lasts longer ,making you less hungry.
- Dates are excellent source of sugar, fibre, carbohydrates, potassium and magnesium. Don't go overboard with them – 4-6 dates are recommended
- Almonds are rich in protein and fibre with less fat – A small handful at suhoor.
- Bananas are a good source of potassium, magnesium and carbohydrates. Great to keep energy levels high.

## **What to drink:**

As much water and freshly squeezed fruit juices as possible between Iftaar and suhoor so that your body can adjust fluid levels.

## **Some common ailments encountered during Ramadan:**

### **Constipation**

Constipation can cause haemorrhoids, fissures and indigestion with bloating.

Causes: Too much refined foods, too little water and not enough fibre in the diet.

Remedy: Avoid excessive refined foods, increase water intake, use bran in baking and brown flour when making flatbread.

### **Indigestion and wind**

Causes: Over-eating. Too many fried and fatty foods, spicy foods, and foods that produce wind eg: eggs, cabbage, lentils. Carbonated drinks like Cola also produce gas.

Remedy: Do not over-eat, drink fruit juices or better still, drink water. Avoid fried foods and processed foods with white flour and sugar.

### **Lethargy**

Excessive sweating, weakness, tiredness, lack of energy, dizziness, especially when getting up from sitting position, pale appearance and feeling faint are symptoms associated with "low blood pressure". This tends to occur towards the afternoon.

Causes: Too little fluid intake, decreased salt intake.

Remedy: Keep cool, increase fluid and salt intake.

Caution: Low blood pressure should be confirmed by taking a blood pressure reading when symptoms are present. If you suffer from high blood pressure you may need your medication adjusted during Ramadan. Please consult your doctor.

## **Headaches**

Causes: Caffeine and tobacco-withdrawal, attempting to do too much in one day, lack of sleep, and hunger. Usually occur as the day goes by and worsens at the end of the day. When associated with "low blood pressure", the headache can be quite severe and can also cause nausea before Iftaar.

Remedy: Cut down caffeine and tobacco slowly starting a week or two before Ramadan. Herbal and caffeine-free teas may be substituted during the time between Iftaar and suhoor. Reorganise your schedule during the Ramadan to have adequate sleep.

## **Low Blood Sugar**

Weakness, dizziness, tiredness, poor concentration, perspiring easily, feeling shaky (tremor), unable to perform physical activities, headache, palpitations are symptoms of low blood sugar.

Causes (in non-diabetics): Too much sugar ie refined carbohydrates especially at suhoor. The body produces too much insulin causing the blood glucose level to drop.

Remedy: Make sure you eat something substantial at suhoor and limit sugar-containing foods and drinks.

Caution: Diabetics may need to adjust their medication during Ramadan. Consult your doctor.

## **Muscle Cramps**

Causes: Inadequate intake of calcium, magnesium and potassium foods.

Remedy: Include foods rich in the above minerals e.g. vegetables, fruit, dairy products, white meat and dates in your diet.

Caution: If you are on high blood pressure medication and with kidney stone problems you should consult your doctor.

## **Summary of do's and don'ts during Ramadan**

- Drink sufficient water between Iftaar and bed time to avoid dehydration.
- Consume sufficient vegetables at mealtimes.
- Eat fruits before your meals rather than at the end of the meal.

- Avoid intake of high sugar (table sugar, sucrose) foods through sweets or other forms.
- Avoid spicy and oily foods.
- Avoid caffeine drinks such as coke, coffee or tea. Caffeine is a diuretic. Three days to five days before Ramadan gradually reduce the intake of these drinks. A sudden decrease in caffeine prompts headaches, mood swings and irritability.
- If you cannot give up smoking, cut down gradually starting a few weeks before Ramadan. Smoking negatively affects utilization of various vitamins, metabolites and enzyme systems in the body

### **Exercise during Ramadan**

Many of our members ask us if they can exercise during Ramadan. The answer to that is yes definitely!! Because Ramadan is really the best time to lose weight and start an exercise regime. Having said that it is critical that you ease yourself into the exercise routine. We always advise our members to start off the exercise at least 2 weeks prior to Ramadan.

If you start your fasting and your exercise all on day one of Ramadan you may find it all too much to cope with if you have had a very sedentary lifestyle so far and will probably fall off the wagon on either day 1 or 2. Be kind to yourself and your body.

So our recommendation is that if you are a heavy smoker and an intravenous coffee and tea addict, then start to ease off one cup and one cigarette a day and start off your exercise routine with 30 minutes in the first week and build up to 45 mins in the second week.

Having implemented all of the above, then come the crunch you will be able to cope much better as your body will have been gently eased into the exercise routine and eased out of excessive tea, coffee and chocolates (all sugary foods). In this way you will have less withdrawal symptoms and therefore less chances of suffering from gruesome, crippling headaches.

Another very critical point to remember is that whilst working out, moderation is the key. Do not try and achieve all the results in one week. Pace yourself and of course remember to take a healthy drink with you to the gym. Do **Not** opt for the fizzy drinks on offer or you will be negating all the efforts you have put into your workout plus you will end up giving yourself lot of gas and bloating.

The best drink to take along is an electrolyte drink as the fluid composition of electrolytes is closest to your body fluid composition therefore absorption occurs at a much quicker rate thus warding off dehydration.

## **Detoxing during Ramadan**

Yes this is an ideal time to Detox. Why you may ask? Because as we all know when you fast you are cleansing your body anyways. It is a great time to introduce various superfoods to your system that will indeed maximise the cleansing process.

Look at it this way. If you have fasted all day why on earth would you want to negate the effects of the fast by piling on unhealthy fried, fatty foods into your system?

So instead your system is nice and clean by Iftaar time. You are feeling lightheaded and cannot wait to stuff your self with all the sugary goodies that you see around you on the table!! What do you do?? SOS!!

Critical rule is to plan ahead!! Even before Ramadan starts you can decide to have a really healthy Ramadan for yourself and family and in fact if you are inviting friends round make a promise to yourself to start a trend by serving all healthy, nutritious goodies and absolutely no fried foods!! Your friends will all thank you for it!!

Go shopping for healthy Ramadan ingredients and not the regular stuff that we end up buying in the way of sugary cordials and traditional Ramadan sweets.

Having planned ahead and used some of our healthy recipes given below, when you arrive at the feast laden Iftaar table you will cast your eye over the wares and like a hawk seek out the items that will help replenish your system with the much needed nutrients, vitamins and minerals.

Start off with a couple of dates and a big bowl of warm soup or a bowl of porridge – recipe given below. Lentil soups or vegetable soups cooked with a handful of barley or oats thrown in is the best possible Iftaar you can treat your stomach to. Starting off with something warm soothes your stomach and relaxes it and allows you to eat at a normal pace.

Following this, give your stomach a break and use this time to say your prayers. In this way your stomach has had time to adjust to the influx of food. If after your prayers you are still hungry and are craving something sweet then treat your self to either a big bowl of fruit or a big glass of mixed fruit juice. This will give your system a big boost of nutrition to make up for the day.

If you are planning to go for a workout, give yourself an hour between your last meal/snack and then head out to the gym. Do take your electrolyte

drink and a banana or date square (recipe given below) with you. Your body will thank you for the electrolyte drink and complex carbs.

Following the workout make sure you come back to a sumptuous dinner of grilled fish or chicken with lots of steamed or baked veggies. The proteins will help your tissues repair after a good workout. The veggies will provide the extra fibre your body needs right now.

Following your healthy meal you need to relax and if you are meeting up with friends for a sheesha then make sure you don't over do it. Sheesha is a social activity and if you are detoxing it is highly recommended that you pretend to indulge in the sheesha activity but in actual fact make sure you have lots of warm water with lemon or herbal teas at hand to keep your body replenished!! (Sheesha smoking is not recommended for anybody due to its high nicotine content – best avoided altogether). And definitely steer clear of the **oh so yummy** baklavas floating around you on those platters. Really your body does not need that sugar!! Opt for honey in your herbal teas instead!!

Now with Suhoor time approaching you are probably thinking “what can I eat?”

Ideally stick with barbecued, grilled or baked fish or chicken, boiled or steamed rice with lots of salad if you are eating out. If eating in then make yourself a simple meal of rice, meat and vegetables – Tajine if you fancy (recipe given below). The simpler your food is the better able your system is to digest it all!!

### **What about supplements?**

WE are usually asked by our members about our opinion on supplements. We say supplements are critical during fasting and even when not fasting. Even if you were having a healthy nutritious and balanced meal, we just do not consume enough fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains to provide us our Daily Recommended Amounts of the various vitamins and minerals that our bodies require.

Also these days we do not always know the source of fruits and vegetables and how long they have travelled before they get to us and how much nutritious value they have lost in transit. Hence some supplementing is good however oversupplementing can be a hazard as well. So do stick with the Recommended Daily Allowances.

The ones most commonly required by the body and recommended by doctors are: vitamin B Complex and vitamin C. These can be taken by pretty much anybody these days as both these help with absorption of other vitamins and minerals and also help to absorb and extract nutrients from food ingested. Other supplements like fish oils and CoQ10 are highly

recommended however always make sure you do consult your doctor before you embark on any supplements regime.

Here are some healthy wholesome recipes to nudge you along during Ramadan.

### **Porridge made with Jumbo oats**

This fabulously nutritious concoction is a great source of fibre, antioxidants and Omega oils whilst being really low Glycaemic Index. Which means it will keep you full for a long time.

It is great as a futoor item or a suhoor item. It provides all the nutrition you need during fasting and in fact if you were to have a bowl of this porridge for Futoor and then go for a workout you couldn't actually do any better in the way of a complete pre workout fuel!!

#### **Ingredients**

- 3 heaped tbsps of Jumbo Oats
- ½ cup water
- ½ cup soya milk or regular milk
- 1 – 2 tsp of honey
- Finely sliced strawberries
- Finely sliced banana
- Whole blackberries
- 1 tbsp flaked almonds

#### **Directions**

- Soak the Jumbo Oats in water at 12 noon if eating it at Iftaar time or at Iftaar time if eating it at Suhoor time
- 10 minutes before you want to eat the porridge place the soaked oats in a pan and cook for 5 -7 minutes until cooked
- Add milk and let simmer for another 2-3 minutes until the mixture is boiling
- Take off heat and pour into a bowl
- Add 1- 2 tsp of honey
- Add sliced strawberries, bananas and blackberries
- Sprinkle flaked almonds
- Sit back and enjoy

### **Chicken Tajine With Preserved Lemon and Olives**

Chicken Tajine with preserved lemon is known to be Morocco's second most popular dish after couscous and considered to be the national dish. Tajine is a pot which is made from heavy clay that has been glazed. The shape of the pot is designed to promote the return of all condensate to the bottom. The base of the pot is flat and circular with low sides, and the lid is a shape of a large dome. Preparation time does not include overnight marinating time.

A specially nutritious dish for the family or if you are having friends round for Iftaar. It is wholesome and satisfying and you do run the risk of overindulging if not careful.

## Ingredients

### Marinade

- 1/2 teaspoon saffron thread
- 1/4 cup water (to soak saffron)
- 2 garlic cloves, halved
- 1 tablespoon fresh ginger, chopped
- 1/2 preserved lemon, rinsed
- 2 onions, Quartered
- 1/2 red chile
- 1 tablespoon sweet paprika
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 pinch salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons fresh coriander (chopped with stems and leaves)
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 2 bay leaves, torn in half

### Chicken and Garnishes

- 1 roasting chicken, cut into 8 pieces (Size 10 or 12) or 8 chicken drumsticks or chicken thighs (With bones)
- 1 tomato
- 1 onion
- 2 large potatoes, cut into wedges
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 tomato, sliced
- 150 g green olives, pitted
- 1 bunch fresh coriander or fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 cup water
- 1 preserved lemon, cut into 6 segments

## Directions

- Marinade: In a small bowl add saffron threads in water and allow to soak for a few minutes.
- In a food processor add all the 'marinade' ingredients and combine until it forms a paste.
- Cover and allow 'marinade' to stand for 30 minutes before using. (marinade can be stored in the refrigerator for up to seven days).
- Wash and dry the chicken, then rub all over with half of the marinade and refrigerate overnight or for at least two hours.
- After marinating, cut tomato and onion into thin wedges and combine a little more marinade. Then spread the tomato and onion into the base of the tajine.
- Place the chicken pieces on top of tomato and onion mixture arranging them in the centre of the tajine.
- Coat potato wedges with the marinade and arrange the potatoes around chicken.
- Top the chicken with onion slices, then tomato slices and olives in between the potato wedges.
- Mix chopped coriander/cilantro with remaining marinade and water (you made add less water, it depends how much your tajine could hold). Pour mixture on top of tomatoes and onions.
- Top with preserved lemon wedges then cover tajine with lid. Cook on a very low gas heat for 45 minutes. Do not stir or lift the lid during the cooking process.
- Serve with suggested couscous.

## Middle Eastern Lentil Soup

This healthy soup is enjoyed throughout the middle east, and although simple in preparation and ingredients, is a very flavorful soup. Lentils are considered a main dish mainly because it is so filling, and is usually eaten with pita bread and lemon on the side. You may need to adjust water and ingredients as well as cook time depending on the size of your lentils. You may add veggies such as diced carrots, celery e.t.c, but this is how it is enjoyed traditionally across the Middle East. Great during Ramadan as it provides the proteins and carbs required to keep the energy levels going by replenishing the body with important nutrients.

## Ingredients

- 8 cups water
- 1 1/2 cups small red lentils
- 3 Maggi chicken cubes
- 1/2 cup finely diced onion

- 1 **garlic clove** (grated)
- 1 1/2 teaspoons **fresh parsley**
- 3/4 teaspoon **cumin**
- 1/2-1 teaspoon **turmeric**

### **Directions**

- Wash and drain lentils.
- In a large pot, combine all ingredients.
- Bring to a boil, then let simmer on medium/low for about 35 minutes.
- Make sure to stir occasionally to avoid the lentils burn or sticking to the pot.
- Serve in with lemon wedges, on side.
- Enjoy!

### **Ramadan Date Bars**

Keep these handy for when the energy levels are sagging. Especially before a workout these bars will provide the boost of complex carbs your body will require prior to the exertion. You can experiment by adding different nuts and seeds to get your Omegas in between Iftaar and Suhoor.

### **Ingredients**

- 100 g low fat **butter** or margarine, softened
- 1 cup **brown sugar** or half a cup of honey
- 1 **egg**
- 1 teaspoon **vanilla essence**
- 1 cup **self-raising flour**
- 1 cup roughly chopped **dates**
- 1/2 cup chopped **walnuts** (optional)

### **Directions**

- Preheat oven to 350 F.
- Cream the butter and sugar together.
- Beat in the egg and vanilla essence.
- Fold in the flour, mix well.
- Add in chopped dates and walnuts.
- Baked in a greased 9x13 pan for 20 - 25 minutes
- Cut into bars or squares when cooled and store in airtight box

Armed with these recipes and tips, get out there and get prepared for this month of spiritual and physical cleansing!! Ramadan Kareem!!