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# Healthy Eating during Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr for People with Diabetes

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Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr are significant observances for Muslims in Trinidad and Tobago. Ramadan represents a month-long period of fasting, one of the five pillars of Islam and involves not putting anything into the body (food, drinks (including water) and medications) from sunrise to sunset daily. Fasting is prescribed to everyone who has attained puberty, with the exception of pregnant and breastfeeding women, the elderly, persons who are travelling and people with illnesses, including persons with diabetes. Those who are unable to fast can give charity or fast outside of Ramadan when their health is improved. Eid-ul-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan and is celebrated by preparing and sharing an array of scrumptious dishes with family and friends.



*Photo sourced from Bing*

**Trembling**

**Irritability**

**Anxiety**

**Fast heart beat**

**Tiredness**

**Sweating/chills**

**Hunger**

**Low Blood Sugar (Hypoglycemia)**  
**Blood Sugar 55-69mg/dL**

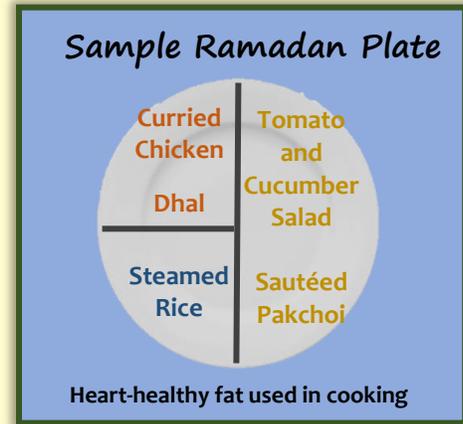
**What to Do**

1. Break the fast by drinking ½ cup fruit juice/soft drink OR eating 1 tbsp sugar/honey to raise blood glucose levels above 70mg/dL.
2. Wait 15 minutes and re-check blood glucose.
3. If still under 70mg/dL, repeat steps 1 and 2.
4. Once blood sugar is above 70mg/dL, have a nutritious meal or snack.

The eating pattern during Ramadan differs from that of other months as food intake mainly occurs in the late evening. For persons with diabetes, Ramadan is a meaningful spiritual experience and they may understandably still wish to fast, but fasting can pose major health risks such as hypoglycemia (low blood glucose), elevated blood glucose, dehydration and clots in the blood vessels. However, with some planning, people can maintain a diabetes-friendly eating pattern that can prevent fluctuations in blood sugar levels and support heart health in the holy month of Ramadan.

**Making Healthy Food Choices for Ramadan**

The meals eaten should be balanced, high in dietary fibre and protein and prepared with heart-healthy fats. Dietary fibre, protein and heart-healthy fats provide satiety (fullness). Balanced meals that follow the healthy eating plate help with portion control, prevent blood sugar spikes after a meal and may decrease hunger during the day. The healthy eating plate should consist of complex carbohydrate foods high in fibre (eg. rolled oats, rice, provisions, potatoes, whole-wheat roti, etc.) on ¼ of the plate, animal and/or plant protein foods (eg. meat, fish, eggs, chicken, dairy products, peas/beans, soya/tofu) on ¼ of the plate and vegetables on ½ of the plate. Heart-healthy fats are found in fish, avocado, chia seeds, flax seeds, nuts, peanut butter, soft margarines and spreads and plant-based oils (except coconut and palm oils) such as canola oil, soybean oil, corn oil, olive oil, peanut oil, etc.



Healthy Eating Plate (Photo adapted by Mizaaj Mohammed from Bing)

### Suitable Snacks during Ramadan

- ❖ Fruit + Unsalted Nuts
- ❖ Fruit + Unsweetened Yogurt or Plain Milk
- ❖ Whole-wheat Crackers + Margarine/Cheese/Fish Salad/Chicken Salad
- ❖ Chicken Salad or Tuna Salad Sandwiches
- ❖ Baked Chicken or Vegetable Samosas or Pies
- ❖ Baiganeer or Saheena + Cooked Channa

Snacks eaten to break the fast should include high-fibre or complex carbohydrate foods (eg. fruit, homemade granola, whole grain crackers) with protein (eg. plain yogurt, nuts, channa, cheese, chicken salad) and/or heart-healthy fats (eg. peanut butter, soft spreads, avocado).

Healthy finger-foods such as chicken or vegetable samosa, cheese or tuna sandwich, saheena, cooked channa, doubles and baiganeer consist of vegetables (source of fibre) and cheese/fish/chicken/peas (source of protein) along with carbohydrate (flour) and are thus balanced.

Using whole-wheat breads and preparing flour-based items with whole-wheat flour where applicable increases the fibre content. Still, these foods should be eaten in moderation because of their high fat content. Eating too much fat increases the risk of heart disease. In addition, people with diabetes should reduce sodium intake by using condiments or sauces sparingly, avoiding salty foods and using fresh seasonings.

### **Staying Hydrated during Ramadan**

Choose beverages that are low in sugar. Limit soft drinks, energy drinks, caffeinated drinks and sweetened fruit juices as these increase thirst and blood sugar. Instead, opt for fresh fruit and vegetables with high water content (eg. five-finger, watermelon, orange, cucumber, pakchoi, tomatoes) and

unsweetened fruit juices. Herbal and decaffeinated teas and infused water (flavoured water made using pieces of fruit, vegetables or herbs/spices) are great options in addition to plain water.

### **Importance of Physical Activity during Ramadan**

Physical activity helps manage blood sugars and reduces the risk of heart disease in people with diabetes. However, the fatigue experienced after fasting may limit physical activity. It is not recommended to exercise vigorously while fasting as there is a high risk of developing low blood sugar and dehydration. Therefore, gentle exercises such as walking and stretching are encouraged after breaking fast. In addition, the Taraweeh\* prayer involves a lot of movement and counts as physical activity.

#### *Tips for a Safe Ramadan for People with Diabetes*

- ✓ Eat high-fibre foods such as whole grain rotis, pastas, breads, crackers; ground provisions; peas and beans; nuts and seeds.
- ✓ Eat balanced meals following the healthy eating plate to keep you full for longer and eat slowly.
- ✓ Eat suhoor\*\* as close as possible to dawn to reduce the length of the fasting period.
- ✓ Avoid eating very large meals at iftar\*\*\* as these will cause high blood sugar levels.
- ✓ Avoid random eating and nibbling between iftar and suhoor. Consume 2-3 small snacks if hungry during the night.
- ✓ Drink mainly non-caffeinated beverages to stay hydrated and limit sugary beverages.
- ✓ Spread water and fluid intake throughout the night and avoid drinking large amounts of water at suhoor and iftar.
- ✓ Do gentle exercises only after breaking fast.
- ✓ Test blood sugar levels during the day and night (especially if on insulin) and if feeling unwell. If blood sugar level is less than 70mg/dL (hypoglycemia) or more than 300mg/dL (hyperglycemia), the fast should be broken.
- ✓ Consult with a doctor and dietitian 1-2 months before Ramadan to determine if fasting is safe for you and what guidelines (including physical activity) you should follow.

## Making Healthy Food Choices for Eid

Eid celebrations are marked by a variety of food and beverages that include paratha roti, channa and aloo, curried goat, kebabs and sweets such as sawine, maleeda, barfi and kurma. Non-traditional dishes such as fried rice, noodles, baked chicken or lamb may also be served, along with fresh salad, soft drinks and sweetened beverages (juices). Managing blood glucose and supporting heart health during the Eid festivities would involve:

- ✚ Planning in advance and making adjustments to medication (especially insulin) to prevent or treat high blood sugars that may result after Eid celebrations.
- ✚ Eating a light snack at least before heading to the mosque.
- ✚ Using less salt, oil and sweeteners (sugar, condensed milk, etc.) when preparing dishes and delicacies.
- ✚ Baking, grilling, roasting or stir-frying foods instead of deep-frying and stewing where possible. For example, try baking saheenas and baiganees instead of frying.
- ✚ Using high-fibre food options where possible. Eg. whole-wheat flour to make rotis and samosas.
- ✚ Serving fruit-based desserts such as fruit salads and sorbets.
- ✚ Having balanced meals according to the healthy eating Ramadan plate to ensure portion control and prevent overeating.
- ✚ Eating slowly and mindfully.
- ✚ Choosing sugar-free beverages such as water, 100% fruit juices (no added sugars) and flavoured water instead of fruit drinks, soft drinks and other sugar-sweetened beverages.
- ✚ Enjoying fried delicacies and sweets in moderation.
- ✚ Remembering that it is okay to indulge a bit for Eid, and that you can get back on track once the festivities are over.

Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr are times of togetherness and food is synonymous with these sentiments. These guidelines can prevent the risks associated with fasting while also allowing people with diabetes to reap the spiritual and psychological benefits of Ramadan. If further information is required, please consult a registered dietitian. Wishing all those observing the fast Ramadan Kareem and Eid Mubarak!

Terms:

\*Taraweeh: special prayer performed every night during Ramadan

\*\*Suhoor: meal eaten early in the morning before the daily fast during Ramadan

\*\*\*Iftar: meal eaten at sunset to break the daily fast during Ramadan