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A Brief Guide to *Ramadan* for New Muslims

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What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. It was during Ramadan that the Revelation of the Quran began. It is the month in which Muslims are obligated to fast. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam.



What is so special about Ramadan?

Fasting the month of Ramadan has many virtues and rewards. The Messenger Muhammad told us that to fast this month sincerely and correctly brings about forgiveness for all sins. Ramadan is the month of mercy and great reward.



When does Ramadan begin?

The Islamic calendar is based on a lunar system. Each month begins and ends with the sighting of the new crescent moon. As such, Ramadan is never at the same time every year, but moves back twelve days from year to year. Ramadan is either twenty-nine or thirty days.

Why do Muslims fast?

Muslims fast because God commanded us to. Fasting has a number of goals, which can be found in the accompanying blog.

How long do Muslims fast each day?

Muslims fast from the break of dawn until sunset each day of Ramadan.



What must I refrain from while fasting?

As an act of devotion to please God, Muslims voluntarily refrain from eating, drinking, and having marital relations during the hours of fasting. Anything which leads to sexual arousal should also be avoided. Moreover, fasting is about refraining from anything displeasing to God. As such, Muslims should try harder to maintain good character and conduct throughout Ramadan. Lying, cheating, becoming angry etc., all go against the spirit of fasting.



Can I eat before dawn?

Yes, it is recommended to do so. This meal is called the “suhur” [pre-dawn meal] in Arabic. You should ensure you are well-hydrated, so that you can manage the fast.

Who must fast?

Every Muslim over the age of puberty must fast. However, certain people may leave off fasting if they have a valid exemption.



What are the valid exemptions to fasting?

There are temporary exemptions and permanent ones. Women should not fast during their menses or during postpartum bleeding.

The following categories also do not have to fast:

- Anyone too weak to fast
- The sick
- Pregnant and breast-feeding women
- The travellers



For all of the above, they make up the days of fasting missed after Ramadan, when the cause of exemption is no longer there. For example, if someone was travelling for three days during Ramadan and did not fast, they should make up the fast for these days after the month of Ramadan.

Anyone permanently unable to fast at all, such as someone too old or with a debilitating disease, feeds one poor person instead of fasting for each day of Ramadan.



When and how do I break the fast?

Fasting ends at sunset. As soon as the sun sets, you can eat and drink. It is preferable to break your fast with dates or water, as that was the tradition of the Messenger Muhammad.

Can I continue to work and do other regular activities?

Yes, everything else can continue as normal in terms of your daily life. However, you should avoid anything which may weaken you and necessitate you breaking your fast prematurely. You should also refrain from anything that contradicts the objectives of fasting.

