Medical Benefits of Fasting in Ramadan

By Anis Ansari, MD, FASN

Ramadan is the ninth month of lunar calendar when fasting is prescribed for all adult Muslims. This year it started on June 28, 2014. This month is full of blessing, mercy and devotion. It is the month of spiritual rejuvenation and repentance as well as training for the rest of the year. Fasting can be used to improve health as well. Knowing which kind of food to eat or avoid, can help make fasting a better experience.

Ramadan is an excellent opportunity for someone who wants to lose some weight. Obesity is a very serious problem in US. Two third of US population is overweight while one third is obese. Dietary modification, decrease in calories combined with mild to moderate exercise after Iftaar can go a long way in achieving this goal. Best foods recommended for early breakfast are slow digesting food like wheat, lentil, whole meal flour and rice. Fiber-containing foods are bran-containing foods like grains, seeds, vegetable and dried fruits are also good. Fast burning foods like sugar, white flour should be avoided along with fried and fatty food. Haleem (Indian dish containing grinded meat, lentil, rice and wheat) are good example of slow digesting food. High sodium containing foods like soups, sauces, gravies should be avoided. Eating fried food and heavy oil items can cause heartburn and discomfort all day.

The physiological effect of fasting includes lower blood sugar, cholesterol and systolic blood pressure. According to some reports, fasting also reduces oxidative stress and inflammation in cells. Many theorize that this helps prevent and repair DNA damage that could otherwise develop into cancer. Some suggest that fasting can slow the little clocks that tick inside our mitochondria and trigger senescence or aging. Therefore fasting can have an anti-aging effect which can make us live longer.

This is the only time of the year when digestive tract gets annual holiday vacation of 29 or 30 days. After 15-16 hour fast, taste buds have taken the rest and food may taste more pleasant and enjoyable. Resting of digestive tract can help treat pancreatitis, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, gastric ulcer etc. On the other hand, patients suffering from severe diabetes or coronary artery disease, kidney stones, etc. are exempt from fasting.

Breaking fast should be with dates and water. Dates are very unique in their nutritional content. They contain very high level of potassium (much more than banana) a key re-hydration mineral and a special carbohydrate blend that enhances hydration above and beyond water alone. They contain a special blend of glucose and fructose for short and long-term energy. They also contain a nutrient Called Beta D-glucan, a soluble fiber that can enhance satiety, and digestive health.

Some main side effects of fasting can include headache usually due to caffeine and tobacco withdrawal, lack of sleep, and hunger. Others may include constipation, indigestion, low blood sugar and muscle cramps.

Overall Ramadan is a month of blessing, devotion and extra voluntary prayer as well as reading the Holy Qur’an. Dietary modification and helpful advice can make it a pleasant experience and a means of improvement in our health.

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