

## Heart Healthy Tips for Ramadaan

It is almost that time of year again when Muslims all over the world will observe fasting from predawn till sunset. Ramadaan is the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic (lunar) calendar. Fasting comprises one of the 5 fundamental pillars of the Islamic faith hence making it incumbent upon every capable male and female of age to fulfill this requirement. It not only requires one to refrain from eating and drinking during a stipulated period of time, but also obligates one to avoid engaging in undesirable behaviours. During this month, eating practices generally become radically altered with increased consumption of fat (saturated and trans fats) and sugar and reduced intakes of unrefined carbohydrates, fibre and fluids. The principles of moderation and balance still apply, so healthy eating should remain at the forefront to ensure a sound mind and body.

### Some tips to ensure good heart health during the fasting month

- *Include all the food groups daily*  
A healthy balanced diet usually includes foods from the different food groups in the correct amounts daily i.e. at least 6 servings of unrefined starches, 4 servings of lean proteins, 5 servings of vegetables and fruits, 2 servings of low fat dairy and 3 servings of healthy fats. This will ensure an adequate intake of macronutrients (energy, carbohydrates, protein and fat), micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) as well as fibre. It should be borne in mind that these are general guidelines and that individual requirements will vary e.g. a very active person will require more servings of starch, protein etc.
- *Eat plenty of fibre-rich foods*  
Fibre is essential to prevent constipation, control blood sugar levels, reduce high cholesterol levels and increase satiety levels. If you have not been eating a fibre rich diet, it is best to *gradually* increase your fibre *and* fluid intake a few weeks prior to fasting so as to prevent the sudden onset of constipation or bloating. High fibre foods include unrefined starches (whole-wheat bread and cereals as well as pasta, oats, oat bran, brown rice, vegetables, fruit, legumes (beans and peas) and lentils. It is easy to meet ones fibre requirements during this month - at the early morning meal (sehri) include a fibre-rich option like whole wheat toast with tea or coffee and cereal with some fruit. For the evening meal (iftaar), include pasta or brown rice with lentils and vegetables or a curry with whole-wheat roti. Haleem, a common lentil based soup eaten during this month is a great source of fibre and other nutrients, therefore filling up on this dish will provide you with plenty of nourishment.
- *Include some healthy fats*  
Fats not only increase the palatability of a dish but are essential to help absorb fat soluble vitamins as a result some healthy fats are required by the body whilst unhealthy ones are not. Consumption of unhealthy saturated fats (full cream dairy, chicken skin, visible fats on meat, Brazil nuts, coconut, coconut milk, hard brick margarines, butter, ghee, coffee creamers, tea whiteners and palm kernel oil) and trans fats (commercially fried foods, biscuits, cakes, crackers and packet chips) raises one's risk for cardiovascular disease by increasing bad cholesterol levels and lowering good cholesterol levels. Good fats include monounsaturated (avocado, olives, olive oil, almonds, peanuts, pecan nuts, cashew nuts) and polyunsaturated fats (oily fish, seeds, soft tub margarine and vegetable oils). By adding a handful of nuts and seeds to your early morning or evening meal, you can be assured of taking in some good heart healthy fats.
- *Drink plenty of fluids*  
Fluid intake is often neglected or forgotten during this busy month. It is essential to ensure adequate fluid intake – this can be achieved by having drinks at sehri, iftaar and during the course of the evening. Low fluid levels can cause dehydration, headaches, low blood pressure or constipation. Aim to consume at least 6 - 8 glasses of water daily. Other drink options that can be included are tea, coffee, fruit juice or milkshake.
- *Avoid high fat foods*  
Fat laden options like deep fried foods, biscuits, cakes, vetkoek, fried chilli bites, rich and creamy desserts and drinks provide little nutritional value and contain excessive amounts of calories causing unnecessary weight gain, nausea and discomfort after eating. It also contains *unhealthy fats* which contribute to the development of cardiovascular disease by increasing bad cholesterol levels in the body. It is best to limit or avoid these foods where possible. Rather choose lower fat or fat free options to

prepare various dishes e.g. skim or low fat milk for milkshakes, low fat evaporated milk instead of cream or low fat cottage cheese instead of sour cream.

- *Use healthier cooking methods*

Cooking methods obviously influence the tastiness of a dish. Nobody wants to eat boiled foods that lack flavour. At the same time, it is not recommended that foods be cooked unhealthily by deep frying or using plenty of oil or ghee (clarified butter). Fried savoury foods are commonly consumed during this month - better options are to bake savouries and for other dishes to stir fry, dry fry, grill, sauté or braai foods. Curries should also be made using minimal amounts of vegetable oil.

- *Engage in light exercise*

If you have been following a fairly active lifestyle you should not stop during this month, but perhaps just tone down. It is still vital to engage in *light* exercises such as walking, cycling (a stationary bicycle is suitable if you have one), stretching and lifting light weights. This will enable one to feel less lethargic, more fit, alert and able to engage in the long evening prayer (taraweeh). If you have not been physically active in the past, try to include some of the above exercises – just make sure that you don't over exert yourself.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa recommends following a heart healthy lifestyle which includes a balanced diet high in fibre and low in unhealthy fats (saturated and trans fats) coupled with regular physical activity to ensure optimal well being.

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*For more FREE heart smart nutritional advice from a registered dietitian, call the Heart Mark Diet Line during office hours on 0860 223 222 or email [heart@heartfoundation.co.za](mailto:heart@heartfoundation.co.za)*