

HOW TO FAST HEALTHILY DURING RAMADHAN: TIPS FOR NURSING MOMS

I have received many emails from concerned lactating muslim mothers on how fasting during the month of ramadhan will affect their milk supply or their health. This article is intended to address your concerns or helps to ease your worries (InsyaAllah). First of all, allow me to share my thoughts on this. To over a billion muslims around the world, Ramadhan is a special month of the year. During the month of Ramadhan, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset every day. For muslims, it is a time for inner reflection, devotion to God and self-control. Allah (SWT) wants ease for His servants and not hardship. Allah (SWT) great mercy towards the weak is His concession for them not to fast. Included in this category are the pregnant and breast-feeding women. As such, fasting during Ramadhan is not obligatory for you whereby you may break your fast and make up the days later. However, I wish to share with you that it is entirely possible to fast and still maintain the milk supply while breastfeeding. This I have learnt and experienced for myself and I have found it to be most rewarding. With the month of Ramadan upon us it is useful and important to look at ways of trying to maintain a healthy diet whilst fasting. Fasting for 12 hours or more can lead to dizziness and fatigue and a lowering of metabolic rate as a means of conserving calories or energy especially for breastfeeding mothers. Here are some simple guidelines and tips to make sure that your diet remains balanced and healthy during this fasting period:

- **Don't skip your breakfast (Sahur)**

Even though sleep may seem far more appealing than waking up to force down some food, what ever you do **DO NOT** skip breakfast. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Research has shown that breakfast provides the essential energy and nutrients needed for concentration, while keeping hunger symptoms like headaches, fatigue, drowsiness and restlessness at bay. In addition, it speeds our metabolic rates. It is therefore vital to ensure an adequate intake at breakfast time. **Personal Tips:**

- After your breakfast, take a meal replacement beverage (the ones people take when on a diet) or rich in fibre to keep your hunger at bay. Hunger to me, is the most common problem for nursing moms.
- Take dates (kurma) for energy (at least 5 to 7)
- Drink protein rich drinks ie. Soya bean drink, ovaltine, horlicks
- So, set your alarm clocks (yes, the more the better!)

- **Eat a wide variety of foods**

When your daily intake is limited to two meals per day, you need to put extra effort into including foods from all the food groups. Our bodies need at least 40 different nutrients daily, to ensure that we grow properly and maintain good health. Although most foods contain more than one nutrient, no single food provides all the necessary nutrients. Moreover, foods have benefits that can't be replicated by a pill. So it is important to eat a wide variety of foods every day, to ensure that we get all of these nutrients. Also, due to the wide variety of foods available for sale in Malaysia at the "Pasar Ramadhan", I feel that we tend to lose sight of things when selecting foods. Select foods each day from each of the five food groups: Breads, cereals and other grain products, Fruit and vegetables, Meat, fish and poultry, Milk, cheese and yoghurt, Fats and sugars (these are low in nutrients & high in calories, so do limit intake!)

- **Eat low glycaemic (GI) foods at breakfast to help control blood sugar levels**
Carbohydrates are classified according to their glucose response or glycaemic index (GI). The GI measures how fast the carbohydrate of a particular food is converted to glucose

and enters the bloodstream. The lower the GI, the slower the food is converted to sugar and the longer it satisfies your hunger. Selecting low GI foods helps maintain normal blood sugar, minimises hunger pangs & satisfies appetite without providing excess calories. Also, by controlling blood sugar levels, you prevent excessive eating binges as a result of low blood sugar levels. Remember to include low GI foods at each meal, and to avoid eating high GI foods on their own, but rather to mix them with low GI foods, which will give an intermediate GI overall. Examples of low GI foods: Oat bran, rolled oats, muesli, porridge, soya, whole wheat, greenpeas, sweetcorn, raw/bolied carrots, eggplant, broccoli, cauliflower, green peas, cabbage, mushroom, tomatoes.

- **Cut down on fat intake during cooking and avoid taking too much salt** (just a heads up to ensure healthy cooking habits)
- **Eat enough carbohydrate foods - especially those rich in fibre**

These foods provide the body with energy. They are rich in B vitamins, and are an excellent source of fibre. Hi-fibre foods also fill you up more than low-fibre counterparts. Foods high in fibre include brown rice, wholegrains, fresh fruit and raw veggies.

- **Remember your fruits and vegetables:** Fruit and vegetables add colour and variety to the menu. They are "protective" foods as they help the body fight off sickness and disease. They are also rich sources of a variety of vitamins, minerals, and fibre, and are low in calories.
- **Drink sufficient fluid**
Always include water in your diet, and cut down on caffeine-containing beverages. Caffeine is a diuretic and will not provide adequate hydration. This is important especially for nursing mothers. **NOTE : Drink to thirst and eat to hunger. There is no need to overdrink! Taking too much liquid causes edema and affects milk supply.**

We all know that maintaining a balanced diet by eating healthily has a vital influence on one's well being. Try following the above principles so that this fast period does not sway too much from the principles of good nutrition. I hope that it will also help you as a nursing mother. As for pumping and other tips:

- Feed or express milk more at night (Drink a glass of warm water before expressing. To calm the nerves)
- Express at night before going to bed or while feeding your baby
- Express in the morning before sahur (this is when your milk is in abundance). If baby is feeding from you then feed and express at the same time.
- Bring along a packet of dates in your handbag. You never know when you might get stuck in some silly traffic jam and end up breaking your fast in the car. Make sure you have a bottle of water too! Upon arriving home, make sure that you break your fast first before attending to your baby (if possible).
- Maintain your expressing time at work.
- And finally, pray and make doa that Allah will help you through....InsyaAllah you will prevail! Good luck and all the best!

References:

- The Essentials of Ramadan, the Fasting Month by Tajuddin Shu'ab
- www.themodernreligion.com