

HEALTH IN ISLAM (PART 3 OF 4): DIET AND NUTRITION

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Islam is a code of life. Muslims do not practice only during the weekends or festive seasons; rather religion is an ongoing part of daily life. Islam is organised in a spiritual and moral way, taking into account humankind's innate needs and desires. The tenets of Islam are derived from the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, known as the Sunnah. These two sources of revelation are a guide, or a manual for life.

Although, it may, at first, seem like a rather strange analogy; let us compare Islam's life instructions with the manual that comes with a computer. Imagine buying a new laptop without ever having seen any of the technological advances of the last several decades. Would you know where the on/off button was? If you managed to turn the computer on would you know how to look after it, do a system restore, run an anti-virus scan, or generally maintain it? Without a manual, the computer would be not much more than a useless piece of technology.

The computer's designers also designed a manual or guide, knowing that without specific instructions the computer would not be put to the best possible use or do what it was designed to do. Technology usually comes with guarantees and warranties that become useless, unless you follow the manufacturer's instructions. Therefore because we want to get the best possible use from our expensive technology we read the manuals and follow the guidelines.

Islam also offers a specific set of instructions that come with a guarantee, a promise of eternal Paradise. There is no 'use by' date on this guarantee and it allows unlimited extensions. If you make a mistake or 'click' the wrong button the instructions clearly advise you how to make amends and restore normality. God designed and created humankind for the specific purpose of worshipping Him and sent Prophets and Messengers with specific guidance to make our task easy. However, without God's guide to life, humankind can become lost and adrift in a world that does not make a lot of sense or offer any real security and contentment. Lives are lived without purpose or meaning and many people seek out an existence that provides little or no real sense of having a ***life worth living***.

The traditions of Prophet Muhammad teach us to cherish good health and realise its true value as one of God's countless bounties.

“And when your Lord proclaimed, “If you give thanks, I will give you more; but if you are thankless, lo! My punishment is dire.” (Quran 14:7)

Islam's holistic approach to health includes treating our bodies with respect and nourishing them with, not only faith, but also with lawful, nutritious food. A major part of living life according to the Creator's instructions is implementing a suitable diet. Choosing wholesome food and avoiding the unwholesome is essential to good health. God says in the Quran, **“Eat of the good things which We have provided for you.” (Quran 2:172)** **“Eat of what is lawful and wholesome on the earth.” (Quran 2:168)**

The Quran contains many verses of advice about healthy eating that relate to the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual health. Encouragement to eat only good and pure food is often combined with warnings to remember God and avoid Satan. Healthy eating not only satisfies hunger but also has an effect on how well we worship.

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy.” (Quran 2:168)

If one becomes obsessed with food or indulges in too much unwholesome or junk food he or she may become physically weak or distracted from his primary purpose of serving God. On the other hand, if one concentrated exclusively on spiritual endeavours and neglected their health and nutrition, weakness injury or illness would also result in failure to carry out obligatory worship. The guidance found in the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad advise humankind to maintain a balance between these two extremes.

A healthy diet is balanced with a mixture of all the foods God has provided for His creation. The variety satisfies all the body's needs for carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins, proteins, fats and amino acids. Numerous verses of Quran mention the foods God has provided for us to nourish and maintain our bodies. It is not an exhaustive list of dietary requirements but rather a general idea of the types of food that maintain a healthy body and prevent illness.

“He created cattle that give you warmth, benefits and food to eat.” (Quran 16:5)

“It is He who subdued the seas, from which you eat fresh fish.” (Quran 16:14)

“It is He who sends down water from the sky with which He brings up corn, olives, dates and grapes and other fruit.” (Quran 16:11)

“In cattle too you have a worthy lesson. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, between the undigested food and blood: pure milk, a pleasant beverage for those who drink it.” (Quran 16:66)

“There emerges from their bellies a drink, varying in colors, in which there is healing for people. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought. .” (Quran 16:69)

“And it is He Who produces gardens trellised and untrellised, and date palms, and crops of different shape and taste (its fruits and its seeds) and olives, and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in taste). Eat of their fruit when they ripen...” (Quran 6:141)

“...and from it (the earth) we produced grain for their sustenance.” (Quran 36:33)

God has also provided us with a list of foods that are forbidden and apart from these everything else is considered lawful.

“Forbidden to you (for food) are: dead animals - cattle-beast not slaughtered, blood, the flesh of swine, and the meat of that which has been slaughtered as a sacrifice for other than God...” (Quran 5:3) “...and intoxicants.” (Quran 5:91-92)

While sweets and junk food are not forbidden they must be eaten sparingly as part of a balanced diet, designed to maintain optimum health. Many of the most common chronic illnesses today derive from unhealthy eating habits. Coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, obesity and depression have all been linked to inadequate diets. The traditions of Prophet Muhammad praise moderation as a way of maintaining good health and the Quran stresses the need to strike a balance between any extremes.

True believers need healthy bodies and minds in order to worship God in the correct way. To maintain a sound mind, a pure heart and a healthy body special attention must be paid to health. The heart and the mind are nourished by remembrance of God, and worship performed in a lawful way, and the body is nourished by partaking of the good and lawful food God has provided. Attention to diet and nutrition is a part of the holistic health system inherent in Islam.

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