

HEALTH IN ISLAM (PART 4 OF 4): FITNESS AND EXERCISE

Rating: 4.6

Description: Exercise is an integral part in the life of a Muslim.

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Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said a strong believer was better than a weak believer.^[1] He was talking in terms of faith and character but also indicating that physical strength i.e. optimum health and fitness were desirable, providing God gave us the ways and means of attaining such strength. Islam's holistic approach to life and thus health offers us the ability to remain strong and healthy. If God decrees that illness or injury are to be part of our lives then Islam provides us with the ways and means of accepting and even being grateful for the tests and trials that envelope us.



This article, the final in a four part series on Islam's holistic approach to health, will examine what Islam, Prophet Muhammad, and the scholars of Islam have mentioned about fitness and exercise. In a separate series of articles, we will look at how Islam suggests we behave when struck by illness or injury.

Believers in Islam must take care of their spiritual, emotional and physical health. Our bodies, the most complex of machines, are given to us by God as a trust. They should not be abused or neglected but maintained in good order. As previously discussed, diet and nutrition play a big part in maintaining the best possible health, so does a lifestyle incorporating exercise. Islam lays emphasis on a simple diet combined with physical exercise.

Fulfilling the obligations of three of the five pillars of Islam requires that Muslims be of sound health and fitness. The daily performance of five prayers is in itself a form of exercise, its prescribed movements involve all the muscles and joints of the body, and concentration in prayer relieves mental stress. Good health is necessary if one intends to fast the month of Ramadan and the performance of the Hajj (or pilgrimage to Mecca) is an arduous task that requires many days of hard physical effort.

Prophet Muhammad advised his followers, to work, to be energetic, and to start their day early, all of which are conditions for a healthy body. He said “O God, make the early morning hours blessed for my nation.” [2] Obesity or an inadequate diet, laziness and weakness are all afflictions for which we will be called to account. Even though preventing illness or injury is often out of our control, there are many conditions brought on or made worse by our own lack of attention to diet and fitness. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, “Any action without the remembrance of God is either a diversion or heedlessness excepting four acts: Walking from target to target [during archery practice], training a horse, playing with one’s family, and learning to swim.”[3]

The Prophet Muhammad and his Companions were naturally physically fit. Life was tougher, long distances were covered on foot, men hunted and farmed their food to survive, and there were no useless recreations to produce laziness and waste many hours of otherwise constructive time. The 21st century contains many distractions and forms of entertainment that encourage laziness and induce ill health.

Although advanced technology has many benefits, it is important that time is not wasted in front of the television screen or game console to the detriment of our health. It has been conclusively proven that obesity in children increases the more hours they watch television.[4] Other studies have indicated that this is equally true for adults. Exercise on the other hand has many benefits.

Exercise increases muscle tone, improves flexibility, enhances endurance, strengthens the heart and fights depression. Exercise also helps achieve significant weight loss. Aerobic exercise fights heart disease and high blood pressure, and reduces the risk of diabetes, while weight training increases muscle strength and reduces fat, increases bone density, fights back pain and arthritis, and improves overall mental health.

Respected Islamic scholar Imam Ibnul-Qayyem stated that movement helped the body get rid of waste food in a very normal way and strengthened the body’s immune system. He also stated that each bodily organ has its own sport (or movement) that suited it and that horse riding, archery, wrestling and racing, were sports that benefitted the whole body.[5]

Exercise and fitness play an integral part in the life of a Muslim, however it should not come at the expense of religious obligations, nor should it infringe upon the time spent with family members. In accordance with the holistic approach to life, which is Islam, every thing must be done in moderation. There is no allowance for extreme or fanatical behaviour. Letting an exercise regime or a sport take over your life is against the teachings of Islam that call for a middle path and a balanced approach. Exercise and fitness should also not involve unnecessary mixing of the sexes or wearing clothing that exposes the parts of the body that should be kept hidden.

Islam encourages anything that promotes refreshing the mind or revitalising the body provided it does not lead to or involve sin, cause harm, or hamper or delay religious obligations. The traditions of Prophet Muhammad undoubtedly encourage involvement

in sporting activities as a way to promote a healthy lifestyle and encourage brotherly love and family togetherness.

In a narration recorded by Imam Bukhari (a scholar who compiled Prophetic Traditions) it states that “The Prophet passed by some people from the tribe of Aslam while they were competing in archery (in the market). He said to them, ‘**Shoot children of Ishmael (Prophet) your father was a skilled marksman. Shoot and I am with so and so.**’ One of the two teams therein stopped shooting. The Prophet asked, ‘**why do not you shoot?**’ They answered, ‘How could we shoot while you are with them (the other team). He then said, ‘**Shoot and I am with you all.**” In another tradition Prophet Muhammad’s beloved wife Aisha mentions their love of games and sports. She said, “I raced with the Prophet and I beat him. Later when I had put on some weight, we raced again and he won. Then he said, ‘this cancels that (referring to the previous race).”^[6]

A true believer recognises the wonder of the human body and is grateful to the Creator. This gratitude is shown in the care and attention given to maintaining optimum health. Islam’s holistic approach to health covers all aspects of the mind, body and soul. A truly health conscious person blends diet, nutrition and exercise with the remembrance of God and an intention to fulfil all their religious obligations.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

[2] Imam Ahmad

[3] *At Tabarani*

[4] These results were reported in a study by researchers from the University at Buffalo, Johns Hopkins University, The National Cancer Institute, and the Centers for Disease Control and reported in Crespo, Carlos J. DrPH, MS; Smit, Ellen PhD; Troiano, Richard P., PhD, RD; Bartlett, Susan J., PhD; Macera, Caroline A., PhD; Andersen, Ross E., PhD (2001, March 15). Television watching, energy intake and obesity in US children. Archives of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine, 155, 360-365.

[5] *Zad-Al-Ma`aad*

[6] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

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