



# Ramadan for breastfeeding mothers: To fast or not to fast?

Alhamdulillah (all praises to Allah) for Ramadan. Ramadan is the holiest month of Islamic calendar, the month of mercy and blessings, the month of the first revelation of the Al-Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad SAW. Muslims around the world rejoice and are excited to embrace this month, as the rewards for all acts of worships (including the Ramadan fasting) are multiplied in blessings. For breastfeeding mothers, sometimes this turns into a question for themselves: should I fast this Ramadan? If I do, will it be safe for myself and my baby?

### Breastfeeding guidance

Breastfeeding is given by Allah in the verses in the Al-Qur'an, as breastfeeding is a child's given right from Allah and is the normal way of nourishing a baby. Some examples of the Qur'anic verses are QS Al Baqarah 2:233<sup>1</sup> and QS Luqman 31:14.<sup>2</sup> Within the verses, it is written that mothers may breastfeed their children 2 complete years for whoever wishes to complete the nursing (period). This aligns with current World Health Organization (WHO) breastfeeding recommendations to breastfeed until 2 years and beyond; with breastfeeding to be exclusive for the first 6 months of life then to continue with nutritious complementary food.

### Fasting and breastfeeding

It may be helpful for mothers to know that intermittent fasting in Ramadan will not affect their breastmilk. Several studies have investigated the effect of fasting and reported that breastmilk retains its major nutrients (carbohydrate, protein, and fat) during fasting.<sup>4,5</sup> There are significant changes to minor nutrients content (magnesium, zinc, sodium, potassium, phosphate)<sup>5,7</sup> but this is temporary and not adversely affecting infant growth in short-term.<sup>3,5,6</sup> A mother's body will adapt to any dietary changes<sup>4,9,10</sup> and will use stored calories to continue optimal milk production.

Breastfeeding mothers are exempt from fasting in Ramadan – but of course they can choose to fast if there is no negative impact to the health of mother and baby. Each mother can consider her own (and her baby) personal situation before deciding to fast or not to fast,<sup>8</sup> as each dyad (mother and baby couple) has their own health status and situation which may differ from others. If a mother is assured of the health of herself and her baby, she can decide to fast. If she has concerns that fasting may affect the overall health of herself and her baby, she can decide not to fast. Breastfeeding mothers can be categorised as 'having sickness/ill' if her and/or her baby's health status is affected thus not allowing her to fast during Ramadan.

With the blessings and mercy of Allah, He gives an exemption so as not burden breastfeeding mothers. In QS Al-Baqarah 2:184:

*Whoever among you is sick/ill or on a journey (and not fast), then (he shall made up fast) a (like) number of the days (missed); and those who are not able to do it (with hardship), to feed a poor person.*

### As baby grows

In general guidance, mothers are to recover their health in the first few weeks after birth until the bleeding (nifas blood) stops and are not to fast during this period. During the first 6 months, while breastfeeding is the exclusive food for the baby, fasting is also not recommended. Hormonal influences during this time can increase thirst, and many mothers report added feeling of thirst while breastfeeding in this period.

When baby is between 6–12 months old, WHO recommends that breastmilk remains the main source of nutrition for the baby. This means no reduction in the frequency or number of breastfeeds as complementary foods are added to the diet. Breastfeed the baby first before offering complementary foods as they do **NOT** replace nutritionally-superior breastmilk compared to mashed fruits/vegetables or minced meat or porridge. Continuing to meet the



appropriate nutritional needs of a baby this age, together with following the WHO recommendations will mean that many mothers may reasonably choose not to fast during this time.

Some babies may choose to eat more often as they reach 12 months old, and mother can reassess their (her and her baby's) own situation. Babies this age are often moving and more active, and sometimes (not always) may breastfeed less often during the day, preferring instead to feed more during the calm of night. Depending on the situation mothers can try fasting and see how it goes. If all goes well, then Alhamdulillah (all praises to Allah).

Alternatively, baby may ask to breastfeed more during the day or mother may suddenly feel unwell/dizzy/headache/disoriented. It is advised to urgently break the fast if this happens. Allah Knows our intention and Allah Knows we tried. It is important to prioritise recovering the health of the mother (and baby) before deciding to try fasting another day. It is okay to play it by ear, taking it day by day. Some mothers may try to fast 1 day/not fasting 2 days, or fast 2–3 days per week, or change the pattern depending on their situation. If a breastfeeding mother has medical concerns or takes regular daytime medication, it is recommended that she consult her health professional before making a decision about fasting. Whichever decision mothers make, it will be important to continue to respond to early feeding cues and breastfeed each time, day and night.

### Fasting Guidance

When deciding to fast during Ramadan, there are a few things that mothers can try to help ensure both breastfeeding and fasting goes smoothly and well:

#### 1. Stay hydrated:

Maintain daily water intake, drink small amounts often between iftar (sunset) and suhoor (meal before sunrise). Drinking too much water all at once on suhoor may fill the bladder too quickly and it is voided out soon after before fasting starts, thus you may feel thirstier.<sup>11</sup> If possible, avoid caffeine, tea, or chocolate as these may increase thirst.

#### 2. Eat wisely:

Don't miss iftar and suhoor meal! Lessen the salt where possible as it may dehydrate you. A weekly meal plan may help mothers to plan nutrient dense meals. For suhoor: complex carbohydrates (eg whole grain, brown rice, granola, quinoa, etc) can help you feel fuller for longer compared to simple carbohydrate (eg white rice, pasta, noodles, white bread). Include protein, vegetables and fruits, and good fats such as fish, avocado, and eggs. A nutrient-dense iftar meal with high water content (eg dates with milk smoothies, green smoothies, broth with legumes) will help to recover your energy more quickly. Cooking big batches and freezing them in small batches can be a time saving option. If possible, choose healthy snacks such as mixed nuts, dates, fruits with nut butter in between iftar and suhoor. Sometimes fried food and sugary treats are unavoidable, so we can choose to have these treats after ensuring we start with a healthier balanced meal.



#### 3. Avoid overexertion:

Plan your daytime activity wisely, take it easy and reduce heat exposure as much as possible. Choose calm activities that can be done indoors. For stay-at-home mothers, make time to rest in between chores and lower the expectations, you don't need to do everything. Your body needs the rest as you're also providing nutrition for your infant. Ramadan is a special time of the year; you can choose to use the energy saved after rest to do ibadaah (worship) also.

#### 4. During breastfeeding:

Sometimes, 'physical stress' that a mother's body feels during fasting may affect the LDR (let-down reflex/milk flow) – it may slow down a bit and some babies may fuss a little more. This is temporary and you can help your body release the milk. Breasts are glands and work in a similar way to salivary glands. When we feel stress/tired/scared/unwell, the mouth feels 'drier', but the saliva is never gone. If we swallow the saliva, the gland will just make more saliva. Some ideas to help are, hold and shape the breast throughout breastfeed, breastfeed in a calm/quiet area, breastfeed while laying down sideways, and take conscious deep breaths and drop the shoulders. These suggestions can help relax and calm the mother's body, thus having a positive effect to the LDR and breastmilk flow.





### 5. Expressing breastmilk:

Some mothers are expressing their breastmilk during the time for many reasons. Like breastfeeding, the aim of expressing is to collect the milk when the LDR happens. The same suggestions to encourage a LDR will work for expressing. Some things to consider if expressing, are sometimes 'physical stress' that mother's body feels during fasting may slows down the LDR and sometimes the milk collected may look a little different. Expressing is different to having a baby feed from the breast so an extra expressing session may be helpful during fasting. Some mothers find that after having their iftar meals, they feel the tension relaxes and the LDR/milk flows more easily as they feel more comfortable.

### 6. Night feeds:

Prolactin (hormone related to breastmilk production) is naturally at its highest level between 1–5 am. Continuing to breastfeed baby through the night signals your body to continue making the milk that baby needs. Many breastfeeding mothers find that breastfeeding laying sideways at night (following the safe sleep guidelines<sup>12,13</sup>) helps them manage the night breastfeeds while they continue resting.<sup>13</sup> Having a bottle of water on the bedside table helps easy access for regular water intake for mothers in the permitted time between iftar and suhoor.

### 7. General guidance:

It's essential for mothers to listen to what their bodies tell them and to be attentive to their baby's needs. Mothers can observe baby's output to assure adequate intake: clear and not smelly urine and soft frequent stools. If baby is consistently having concentrated and smelly urine when mother is fasting, or if breastfeeding mother feels dizzy/unwell/headache/disoriented at any time during fasting, urgently break the fast and take steps to rehydrate yourself with a moderate quantity of fluid (water with salt and sugar, or sugary drink, or rehydration fluid). The health of you and your baby are the priority and there is no need for feelings of guilt. Allah does not make Ramadan fasting a burden for us, and Allah has created mothers to provide breastmilk as the normal way to nourish their babies. Breastmilk is baby's given rights from Allah – Allah Knows this and thus makes exemptions for breastfeeding mothers. There are other ways we can worship/ibadaah and earn the rewards/blessings during Ramadan if, based on our health situation, we decide not to fast: dhikr, read Qur'an, taraweeh and sunnah prayers, giving charity, etc. Tending to our babies, children, and family are also a way of worship when we make the intention because of Allah.

May this information help breastfeeding mothers to decide about fasting depending on their personal and health situation, during Ramadan.

Ramadan Mubarak to you. May you reap the rewards of this beautiful month and may the blessings and mercy of Allah flows to you always.





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