

A Cycle of Faith

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is the holy month of fasting celebrated by Muslims the world over. The celebration is unique in that it begins and ends with the appearance of the crescent moon and is not tied to a specific date. The Muslim calendar year is 354 or 355 days, making it shorter than the Gregorian calendar, which rounds out at 365 or 366 days (leap years). This means that Ramadan begins 10–12 days earlier each year, and therefore, during a 33-year cycle, Ramadan will occur during every season.



Fasting for Faith

Islamic tradition states that during the month of Ramadan that no food or drink is to be consumed while the sun is in the sky. The season is not a period of atonement but instead is a time for Muslims to practice self-restraint. One of the five pillars (or basic tenets) of Islam is *sawn*, which means “to refrain” in Arabic.

Sawn is thought to simply refer to the obligation to fast during Ramadan, but, in fact, extends to all “immoral” behavior, including unkind thoughts, lies, and even bad intentions for an otherwise good act. During Ramadan, an unkind thought would break your fast in the same way that eating an apple would. Fasting is a time of self-reflection, spiritual meditation, self-improvement, and a way to heighten devotion to Islam. The purpose is ultimately a “palate cleanser” in which a person can re-align themselves with the goal of having empathy for others and encouraging generosity and charity toward others.

Discussion Starters

- Many religions and philosophies practice fasting. Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Taoism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Coptic Christians all join Islam in using fasting as a way to become closer to God. What are your feelings about fasting for religious purposes? Do you agree or disagree that there are benefits?
- The tenets of Ramadan are to act as a reminder to put God and others first. How is this similar to other religions?

The Beauty of Fasting in a Cycle

A cyclical Ramadan allows those fasting to appreciate the beauty of each season in a unique way as well as a way to mark life-changing milestones and memories. For example, a young child who has their first fast (around age 14) during summer months may appreciate that they do not have school to suffer through while hungry and instead can sleep for much of the day and then stay up later at night for family meals and trips to the mosque. Fasting in the winter means shorter days and an easier time adhering to rules.

In addition, the change of seasons allows practitioners to truly savor the foods available each season. Although the fast is traditionally broken with dates, the meals that follow change depending on the season and is not restricted to specific Ramadan meals. Chilled watermelon in the summer or hot soup in the winter are examples of different foods that may be shared by family and friends after the sun sets. Not being able to eat throughout the day will make fresh seasonal fruit taste better or have a person savor home-baked bread all the more. Appreciating nature and what is available is all part of the holiday.



Those who partake in Ramadan also note that the cyclical nature makes the entire celebration more special, because nothing can be “automatic.” Unlike other holidays that have set days in specific seasons and therefore have the same décor pulled out of storage every year, the ever-changing nature of Ramadan means that each person has the freedom to choose how they wish to decorate or celebrate. Celebrants make their choices unique to their relationship with their religion. For a springtime Ramadan, the house might be decorated with fresh flowers and pastel colors, while an autumnal celebration might include wreaths made of colorful leaves or garlands of pinecones.

Additionally, because of the 33-year cycle, a person who remembers a childhood Ramadan happening in the winter may be thrilled to share that same memory with their own child. Practitioners say it is a wonderful experience to know that with the yearly shift of days, Ramadan will eventually come around to the same starting point again, making them feel connected with their past and present. At the same time, the changing dates help them acknowledge that the world is in a constant state of flux, and we, as humans, are just part of a natural cycle.

Discussion Starters

- Do you prefer having holidays occur at the same time every year, or do you like the idea of a holiday perpetually moving forward?
- If you celebrate Ramadan, what is your best Ramadan memory?

Celebration Foods

After the sunset prayer, Muslims gather to break their fast. They may meet in their homes or in larger groups in mosques to share a meal with friends and extended family. The meal they share is called *iftar*, of which the first thing to be eaten is either dates or apricots. There are two reasons that dates are used. First, the Prophet Muhammad wrote, “When one of you is fasting, he should break his fast with dates; but if he cannot get any, then (he should break his fast) with water, for water is purifying.”

Secondly, science shows that dates would be an ideal food for breaking a fast because of their nutritional value. Chock full of fiber, potassium, and vitamin A as well as a good combination of glucose, fructose, and sucrose, dates increase and stabilize blood sugar levels after a long day of fasting.

After the dates, the food eaten is typically very personal to the individual or family. While some people try to maintain healthy meals that are light and full of fiber and proteins, others love to snack on simple favorites. Traditional foods such as paneer fritters, spicy fruit chaat, dal, curry, and kebabs are eaten. In the summer, more hydrating foods, such as light soups or fruit salads, might be eaten as well. But no foods are required or restricted, and young Muslims living in America report that sometimes they simply have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or even pizza after a long day of school or work.

Eating from dusk until dawn is allowed, and many families will serve a series of snacks before prayer and then a complete meal later in the evening.



Traditional Foods to Feast On

Below is a short list of some popular traditional meals found in various countries that celebrate Ramadan. Links to the recipes are provided in case you wish to try them.

[Lentil Stew with Coconut \(Dalma\)](#)

In the east Indian state of Odisha, lentil stew, fragrant with coconut and enriched with silky, thinly sliced onions and long-simmered sweet potatoes, is an everyday staple.

[Fried Chickpea-Battered Potatoes \(Bhajiya\)](#)

This is a Mumbai street-food snack from Indian chef Raghavan Iyer. “Chunks of potato are dredged in a light chickpea-and-rice-flour batter that is spiced with turmeric and chile powder.”

[Al Kabsa - Traditional Saudi Rice and Chicken](#)

This is a traditional Arabic dish of spiced chicken, typically enjoyed with a hot sauce called *shattah*.

[Coconut Dal with Crispy Paneer](#)

In this recipe, creamy dal is paired with cubes of golden paneer.

[Syrian Bread](#)

This traditional Middle Eastern flatbread can be eaten as a pre-dawn meal or as part of dinner.

[Egyptian Feta Cheese Omelet Roll](#)

A quick and easy meal to keep you full all day.

Ramadan is celebrated in many countries and it would be impossible to list each country traditional foods, but All Recipes has compiled [56 Traditional Dishes](#) to Serve During Ramadan. See which of these best tickles your tastebuds.

Discussion Starters

- What foods do you feel are important to you for your secular or religious holidays? Are there any particular foods that make you feel more in touch with a holiday?
- Besides holidays, are there any foods that feel celebratory to you?
- During Ramadan, families usually eat together to celebrate the breaking of their fast. What are benefits of this togetherness? Does eating with extended family remind you of your own family traditions?

Ramadan Facts

What activities are performed during Ramadan?

- *Sawm* (fasting)
- *Zakat* (*zuh-KAHT*) and *sadaqah* (alms giving)
- *Taraweeh* prayer (Sunni Muslims)
- Commemorating Nights of al-Qadr (Shia and Sunni Muslims)
- Reading the Quran
- Abstaining from all bad deeds and staying humble

A few common terms used during Ramadan

- *Suhoor/Sehri*: An early meal eaten before sunrise to provide sustenance for a day of fasting
- *Iftar*: The meal with which the fast is broken at sunset
- *Zakat*: A certain part of your surplus income that is given out as charity

Additional Activities

1. Learn more about [modern Muslim students in America](#) through their own words.
 2. Learn more about [Ramadan](#) in general and fasting.
 3. Create a beautiful [henna hand dish](#) from clay. In India and Morocco, applying henna is a fun part of Eid al-Fitr festivities (the celebration after Ramadan). Use your time during Ramadan to make these beautiful and simple dishes.
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