

# Observing Ramadan: Do's and Don'ts

Ramadan, an important religious holiday is observed by Muslims throughout the world. It is a time of personal introspection, spiritual reflection, and increased devotion and worship through prayer and fasting. Our discussion this month will focus on the history, meaning, and traditions of Ramadan and will cover some key “do's and don'ts” that are practiced during this significant holiday.

## Preparations and How-To's

- This is a copy of the complete activity for the facilitator to present. Check the [Additional Activities](#) section for other ideas to bring to the activity.
- [Pictures](#) can be printed and passed around during the activity or displayed on a computer or television.
- Consider bringing in some traditional appetizers for Ramadan, including dates used for breaking the fast each evening. [Recipes can be found here.](#)



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### Introduction

Ramadan falls each year during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which was the month during which the Quran (pronounced *kuh-RAHN*), the sacred book of Islam, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. While observing Ramadan, adult Muslims engage in fasting from dawn to dusk, refrain from specific behaviors, and engage in practices intended to render them more holy and closer to God (Allah). This holiday is celebrated in Muslim communities worldwide—even in countries where the majority of the population is not Muslim. These include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, Australia, and South Africa. Ramadan is celebrated more widely in predominantly Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Somalia, Oman, Turkey, Iraq, Yemen, Kuwait, Syria, and Afghanistan.

### The History of Ramadan

The origins of Ramadan are rooted in the life of Islam's founding prophet, Muhammad, who in 610 AD had an encounter with the divine. When he was approximately 40 years old, he was seeking solitude and reflection in order to grapple with troubling questions. During one of his month-long retreats to a mountain cave in Mecca, he was visited by the archangel Gabriel and presented with the Quran—the holy scripture of Islam. Gabriel commanded Muhammad to read the book and proclaimed him a messenger of God.

This initial encounter was followed shortly thereafter with more revelations from Gabriel, and soon, realizations that emanated from Muhammad's own heart. According to *Hadith*, which gives written accounts of Muhammad and his revelations, all holy scriptures were sent down during that month, and that is why Ramadan is so sacred in Islam.

## Traditions and Practices

Central to the observance of Ramadan is the tradition of fasting (*sawm*). A pre-dawn meal, called *suhour*, must sustain a person throughout the day. After sunset, the fast is broken with dates and water. This is followed by a more substantial meal or feast known as *iftar*. This meal consists of cultural foods that are indigenous to the region.

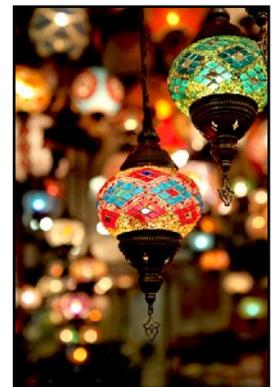
It is compulsory in the Islamic religion for all who are not ill, elderly, traveling, pregnant, breastfeeding, or pre-pubescent to refrain from eating and drinking during daylight hours. Further, women who fast during menstrual or postpartum bleeding will not be acknowledged for their fasting and must repeat the fasting later to make up for those days. Those who are ill or traveling must also make up any missed fasting days.

Ramadan is also a time for intensified and enhanced prayer and greater devotion to God (Allah). During this month, in addition to their five mandatory daily prayers, Muslims often end the day with a special voluntary prayer called *Taraweeh*. The Islamic faithful consider the month of Ramadan an ideal time to recite from the Quran, read it in its entirety, and visit mosques during prayer time with greater frequency. The final 10 days of the holiday are most holy, and the 27th night—known as the Night of Power—is especially significant. That's because it was on the 27th night that Muhammad received his first revelation.

Virtue is also pursued more ardently during Ramadan. There is heightened resistance to sinful ways or unholy distractions, such as impure thoughts, crude or vulgar language, and gossip. There is also intention among those observing Ramadan to practice increased charity. *Zakat*, which is the tradition of making offerings to benefit the poor, is one of the [Five Pillars of Islam](#) (the fundamental acts of worship). During Ramadan, *zakat* is practiced more frequently and offerings are more generous.

During Ramadan, a tradition is practiced in which Muslims decorate their homes, shops, and streets with lanterns, lamps, stars, and crescents. It is believed this tradition may have originated in Egypt, where the ruler of the Fatimid Caliphate was greeted with lanterns. Ramadan is also sometimes celebrated after dark with fireworks and lively evening social gatherings among family and friends.

At the end of the month, Ramadan is typically concluded with a large celebration known as *eid al-fitr* (feast of breaking the fast). It begins the day following the end of Ramadan (*Shawwal*) and usually continues for three days. During this time, there are special prayers, the exchanging of gifts, and meals shared with family and friends.



## Discussion Starters

- Do you or does anyone you know observe Ramadan?
- What do you most admire about the traditions of this religious holiday?
- If you were breaking a fast, what foods would you most enjoy?
- Have you learned anything from this discussion about Ramadan that you didn't know before?

## Do's and Don'ts During Ramadan

In addition to the mandatory practices already discussed, there are some essential do's and don'ts that are followed during the holy month of Ramadan.

## First, the Do's

- The breaking of the daily fast should only occur when the sun has set. A sunset call to prayer (*maghreb*) is immediately followed by the breaking of the fast. In Arab countries, dates and water are commonly consumed. This helps restore energy and focus the mind for the purposes of spiritual reflection and dedication. Once the fast is broken, everyone prepares for prayer.
- The predawn meal (*sahoor*) should be eaten as late into the night as possible so that strength and mental energy can be sustained throughout the fasting hours.
- Fasting must be intentional in order to be valid. A decision must be made each night that fasting will resume by dawn the next day, and the act of fasting must be willfully dedicated to Allah. This represents obedience that comes from the heart.
- The voluntary *taraweeh* prayer after the night prayer at the end of each day helps the worshipper create a stronger bond with Allah.
- When a person follows the path of the Prophet Muhammad—called Sunnah—they become more holy and a better role model for Muslims in good faith.
- In addition to making material offerings of *zakat*, be charitable in your actions and treatment of others. Choose good deeds, share meals, visit relatives, assist others, be useful, and give of your time. The rewards for giving in Islam come through fulfillment of your rights toward the Lord and also His creations.
- Recite the Quran excessively to communicate and strengthen bonds with the Almighty.



## And Now for the Don'ts

- Do not use alcohol, tobacco, or gum.
- Do not have sexual relations.
- Don't entertain unclean thoughts or use foul language.
- Do not lie, quarrel, or lose patience.
- Don't begrudge anyone. Forgiveness and tolerance must be practiced in order to be deserving of forgiveness from the Lord.
- Do not waste time or engage in indulgent behavior, such as oversleeping, idle talk and gossip, watching television, listening to music, and going on shopping sprees. These are distractions from the pursuit of spiritual growth and betterment.
- Try not to use toothpaste, ear drops, or inhalers while fasting. Use of medications or healing therapies is also discouraged.
- Don't participate in strenuous exercise or labor during fasting.
- Do not overindulge during *sahoor* or *iftar*, as it creates imbalance in the body and defeats the entire purpose of fasting.
- Don't refuse an invitation to share *iftar* unless it can't be avoided.

## Questions & Answers

1. For many, Ramadan falls on different dates each year. Why is this?

**Answer:** Ramadan always begins on the same day each year on the lunar Islamic calendar, but the solar Gregorian calendar doesn't align with the lunar cycle. Therefore, the dates of Ramadan change from year to year in regions of the world that follow the Gregorian calendar.

2. What does the word *Ramadan* mean in Arabic, and why was this word chosen for this particular holiday?

**Answer:** It means “scorching” and was chosen because the month of Ramadan falls during a very hot time of the year in the Arabic region.

3. Since 1996, the White House has hosted an *eid al-fitr* dinner each year until recently. Who hosted the first, and what recent changes took place?

**Answer:** Hillary Clinton hosted the first dinner in recognition of the conclusion of Ramadan. In 2017, the Trump administration chose not to have the dinner but resumed the long-standing tradition in 2018.

4. At what age do Muslims begin fasting in Ramadan?

**Answer:** They begin when they reach puberty, although in the years approaching puberty they are often encouraged to give up some foods during the day to prepare them for the sacrifice and necessary discipline ahead.

5. What do elderly and frail Muslims do during Ramadan to compensate for their exemption from fasting?

**Answer:** They are expected to offer a meal (or its value) to one needy or poor Muslim every day of Ramadan.

## Additional Activities

1. Experience the spiritual beauty of Ramadan with this [inspirational song and video](#) by Maher Zain.
  2. Check out this [music video](#) featuring a montage of Ramadan celebrations. It opens with an excerpt of President Barack Obama's remarks at the 2011 White House *eid al-fitr* dinner.
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