

# Nutrition Guidelines for Diabetes

## Fasting for Ramadan

متوفر أيضاً باللغة العربية.

Also available in Arabic: AR85-2559



[www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca)

# Fasting for Ramadan

- If you fast for Ramadan and you have diabetes, you may be at a higher risk for diabetes complications, like dangerous low blood sugar levels. This pamphlet explains how to stay healthy and lower your risks while fasting.
- About **3 months before you plan to start fasting**, talk with your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) and/or your diabetes health care team about your risk for complications. They will help you to:
  - › improve your long-term glucose (sugar) control. This will help you to start your fast with stable blood sugar levels.
  - › prepare for your fast if you take insulin or medication to manage your diabetes.
  - › learn the signs and symptoms of **hypoglycemia** (low blood sugar) and/or **hyperglycemia** (high blood sugar).
  - › make sure your family or support persons know the signs and symptoms of hypoglycemia and hyperglycemia, and what to do when they happen.

- **Your risk for complications while fasting will depend on:**
  - › The type of diabetes you have (like Type 1, Type 2, gestational)
  - › Your hemoglobin A1c level
  - › If you take insulin and/or medications to manage your diabetes
  - › Any other health conditions you may have
- It may be dangerous for you to fast if:
  - › you find it hard to regulate your blood sugar levels.
  - › you regularly have hypoglycemia.
  - › you have had severe (very bad) hypoglycemia in the last 3 months.
  - › you do not notice when you have hypoglycemia.
  - › you have had ketoacidosis in the last 3 months.
  - › you are pregnant and have diabetes.
- A dietitian can help you find out your risks. Based on your risks, your health care provider may recommend that you **do not** fast.
  - › If you still choose to fast, they will respect your choice and support you to fast safely.

## Medications

- Talk to your primary health care provider, pharmacist, or diabetes management team if you are planning to stop taking your medications while fasting.
  - › They can help you make a new medication schedule to keep taking your diabetes medications while you are not fasting, if needed.
- **If you take insulin**, you will need to adjust the amount while you are fasting. Talk with your primary health care provider, pharmacist, or diabetes management team before fasting.
- **If you take medications for hyperglycemia**, your primary health care provider may tell you to stop taking them or adjust the amounts while you are fasting. These medications include:
  - › Sulfonylureas, like gliclazide (Diamicron®)
  - › SGLT2 inhibitors, like empagliflozin (Jardiance®) and canagliflozin (Invokana®)
- **It may not be safe to take insulin or your usual medications when you have not eaten any carbohydrates (carbs)**. Talk to your primary health care provider, pharmacist, or diabetes management team to find out what is right for you.

## What are the risks of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar)?

- When you have diabetes, it is important to eat complex carbs with all meals to give your body the energy it needs. This helps to keep your blood sugar level from getting too low.
  - › For most people, a **blood sugar level under 4 mmol/L is low.**
- **Your risk of hypoglycemia is much higher while you are fasting. It is important to:**
  - › check your blood glucose more often. It is best to check it when you wake up, throughout the day, and before you go to sleep.
  - › **If you have Type 1 diabetes**, check your blood glucose at least 5 times a day.
  - › **If you have Type 2 diabetes**, check your blood glucose 2 to 5 times a day.
  - › check your blood glucose any time you feel symptoms of low blood sugar.
- **Symptoms of low blood sugar include:**
  - › Feeling shaky or weak
  - › Feeling very tired
  - › Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach)
  - › Sweating or feeling clammy (damp)
  - › Problems seeing or blurred vision
  - › Extreme (very strong) hunger

- › Confusion
- › Trouble talking
- **Avoid intense (very strong) exercise and long periods of exercise**, especially just before Iftar (sunset meal). This is when your body has gone the longest without carbs.
  - › Low-intensity exercise (like walking, yoga, and stretching) can be safe and healthy if you are checking your blood sugar regularly (before and after doing physical activity). Ask your primary health care provider or your dietitian if this is right for you.

- **If your blood sugar gets dangerously low, you may need to break your fast. Low blood sugar is a medical emergency.**
  - › Keep 15 grams of fast-acting sugar (like dextrose tablets, glucose tablets, fruit juice, or honey) with you at all times.
  - › Make sure your family or support persons know what to do if you have low blood sugar.

## **If you have low blood sugar:**

1. Eat 15 g of fast-acting sugar. Examples include:
  - › 4 Dex4® Fast Acting Glucose tablets
  - › 1 Tbsp of honey or maple syrup
  - › 1 Tbsp of white sugar in water
  - › 150 ml of juice or regular pop
  - › 2 rolls of Rockets® candy
2. Wait 15 minutes, then check your blood sugar again.
  - › **If it is above 4 mmol/L** and you are going to eat within the next 60 minutes (1 hour), wait to eat until your meal.
  - › **If it is above 4 mmol/L** and your next meal is not within the next hour, eat a balanced snack (like cheese and crackers or toast with peanut butter).
  - › **If it is below 4 mmol/L**, eat another 15 g of fast-acting sugar.

## **If you are driving:**

- › **Stop and treat your low blood sugar.**
- › **Do not** drive until your blood sugar is above 5 mmol/L. It may take up to 40 minutes to recover before you can safely drive again.

## What are the risks of hyperglycemia (high blood sugar)?

- You may also have a higher risk of hyperglycemia while you are fasting, especially if you are not taking your usual medications.
  - › Not taking insulin may cause **gluconeogenesis**. This is when your body breaks down glycogen to make glucose. More glucose in your body can cause your blood sugar levels to go up.
  - › Oral (taken by mouth) hyperglycemic medications can keep your blood sugar from getting too high.
- Eating a meal that is high in carbs when you break your fast at Iftar can raise your blood sugar. You can help to keep your blood sugar levels stable by:
  - › Making sure you drink enough fluids
  - › Eating foods that are high in fibre and protein. Talk to your dietitian about what foods are right for you.
  - › Instead of breaking your fast with just dates, add nuts or nut butter to the dates to slow down how fast they are digested



- High blood sugar can lead to dehydration as the body tries to remove extra glucose through the urine, which draws fluids from your tissues. In severe cases, this dehydration and lack of insulin can result in **diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA)**.

**Call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away if:**

- › Your blood sugar is above 20 mmol/L
- › Your blood sugar does not go down after you have tried to treat it, and you do not feel well

### **What are the risks of dehydration?**

- Not drinking any fluids during a fast can lead to dehydration. This can raise your risk of complications from diabetes.
- Make sure you drink fluids:
  - › at the beginning of the day.
  - › at the end of the day.
  - › during Suhoor and Iftar.
- Water and drinks with no sugar or caffeine are best.

- Electrolyte drinks (like sports drinks) may help if you are very dehydrated. Ask your dietitian or health care provider if these are right for you.
- **Do not:**
  - › do any exercise that makes you sweat.
  - › spend a lot of time outside if the weather is hot.

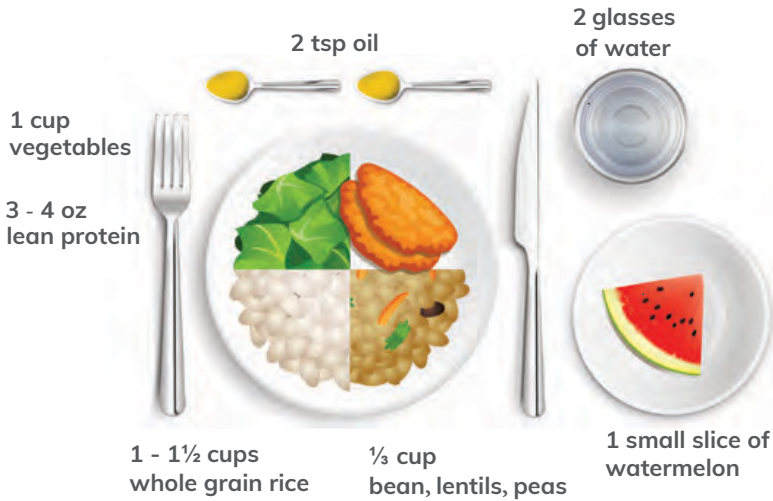
These can cause you to get dehydrated more quickly.

## **Meal planning during Ramadan**

- Divide calories between Suhoor and Iftar, and have 1 to 2 snacks, if needed.
- Make sure you are well hydrated. Drink lots of water during Suhoor and Iftar, and between meals. Some foods can also be a good source of fluid, like soups, smoothies, fruits, and vegetables.
- When you are fasting for more than 10 hours, eat Suhoor as late as possible. This may help to keep up your blood sugar levels throughout the day and prevent hypoglycemia.
- Eat a balanced meal at Suhoor that includes complex carbs, protein, and fibre. This will help you get ready for your fast.

- Eat a balanced meal at Iftar that includes complex carbs, protein, and fibre. Choose high sugar desserts less often after Iftar and between meals.
- Ramadan is a good time to practice mindful eating and to enjoy meals with your loved ones.
  - › Mindful eating is being fully present and paying attention to your food, your senses, and your body's signals while eating.
  - › It involves slowing down, noticing the taste, texture, and smell of your food, and being aware of your hunger and fullness signals.
- Mindful eating can help you to:
  - › **Focus on the moment:** Avoid distractions like your phone or TV.
  - › **Engage your senses:** Notice the colours, smells, textures, and tastes of your food.
  - › **Eat slowly:** Take your time and chew your food well to fully savour each bite.
  - › **Listen to your body:** Pay attention to your hunger and fullness signals, and stop eating when you feel satisfied.
  - › **Accept your thoughts and feelings:** Notice any emotions or thoughts that come up while you are eating without judging them.
  - › **Be grateful:** Be thankful for the food that you are eating and the nourishment it gives.

- Being mindful of your portion sizes can help to prevent hyperglycemia after a fast.
- The image below shows a balanced meal that includes lean protein, complex carbs, healthy fats, and water for hydration:



## **Best food choices for Suhoor**

- Eating a balanced meal high in protein and complex carbs can help to prevent hypoglycemia.
- Eating foods that are high in fibre can help you to feel full longer. Examples include:
  - › Whole grains (like barley, bran, brown rice, brown roti, buckwheat, couscous, oats, quinoa)
  - › Lentils, beans, seeds, chickpeas
  - › Fruits and vegetables
- If you are fasting for more than 10 hours, eat Suhoor as late as possible.

## **Best food choices for Iftar**

- Start Iftar with water to avoid dehydration.
- If you eat dates to break your fast at Iftar, it is best to eat only 1 or 2. Dates are high in carbs. Eating them with a source of fibre and/or protein can help to prevent hyperglycemia.
- Examples of foods that have fibre:
  - › Fruits
  - › Vegetables
  - › Seeds (like chia or flax)
  - › Whole grains (like barley, bran, brown rice, brown roti, buckwheat, couscous, oats, quinoa)

- Examples of foods that have protein:
  - › Dairy products (like milk, cheese, yogurt)
  - › Nuts, nut butters, and seeds
  - › Eggs
  - › Fish
  - › Lean Halal meats (like skinless chicken, skinless turkey, lamb, rabbit)
  - › Beans or lentils

## **Sample meal plan**

### **Suhoor meal**

- › 2-egg omelet, small roti, glass of milk, small bowl of tomato and onion salad, 2 glasses of water

### **Iftar snack**

- › 1 to 3 small dates, 3 nuts (like walnuts or almonds), 2 glasses of water

### **Iftar meal**

- › Roast chicken, dal or lentil curry, vegetable curry, rice, plain yogurt, side salad, 2 glasses of water

### **Snack**

- › 1 piece of fruit, dessert, 2 glasses of water

## **After Ramadan**

- The different mealtimes and activity levels during Ramadan can cause changes in your body (like your energy level or weight). Talk to your primary health care provider, pharmacist, or diabetes management team if you are worried about losing or gaining weight.
- Your body may react to insulin differently over time. It may help to talk with a dietitian as Ramadan ends and you go back to eating more often.

**What are your questions?**

**Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.**

# Notes:

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This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:  
[www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources)

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:  
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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