

Fasting: Benefits and Probable Health Harmfulness from the Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Fasting is a form of Islamic worship to approach God. There is a direct relationship between fasting, abstaining from eating and drinking, and an individual's health as well as his ill-health. Therefore, it is of utmost importance in the Islamic perspective to weigh the spiritual benefits achieved through fasting against its probable harmfulness to an individual's health.

Regarding fasting, the Islamic perspective is based on spiritual and social goals whose achievement centers around fasting according to the Islamic principles. But, in medicine, fasting is merely dealt with abstaining from eating and drinking which is regarded as one aspect of this Islamic ritual. Additionally, the concept of harmfulness is defined as making a defect or disorder occurring in the body, the recognition of which is within the responsibility of medicine and the decision about which is within the responsibility of an individual.

Medical science can determine the effects and consequences of thirst and hunger during the month of Ramadan. In the religious perspective, it has been emphasized that fasting is for achieving the divine virtue, and this shouldn't be in conflict with maintaining man's health. Therefore, the conditions in which there is the probability of harmfulness to man's health due to fasting, man shouldn't fast. As a result, medical science could recognize the conditions in which there is probable harmfulness to man's health.

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Introduction

Fasting in the holy month of Ramadan is one of the obvious manifestations of the Islamic worship for approaching God and it is considered as a great social glory. The holy Qur'an doesn't exclusively consider fasting for Muslims and holds that it had also been obligatory for the followers of other religions. "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil)" (1).

The goal of fasting is to reach the level of virtue which itself is achievable when man has sincerity in his actions. Justifying the obligation of fasting, Hazrat Fatemeh (SA), the daughter of the holy prophet of Islam (PBUH), says: "God has obliged fasting to make man persistent in his sincerity" (2).

Like any other forms of worship, fasting is based on two main premises: the first one is the

intention for approaching God, and the second one is the method applied in so doing reached through specified external actions the important of which is abstaining from eating and drinking. Hence, through fasting not only can man achieve spiritual goals, but also he can benefit from its physical and social effects among which is maintaining health (3). Accordingly, it is claimed that fasting is closely related to medical science. This fact has been confirmed by the Islam holy prophet's maxim saying that: "Fast in order to be healthy" (4).

Nevertheless, if man assumes that there is a logical and considerable probability that fasting could be harmful to his health; he shouldn't fast according to the religious orders and if he fasts deliberately, his fasting is void (5). Therefore, many Muslims commonly at the

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beginning of the holy month of Ramadan consult doctors to realize whether they are able to fast or not. According to religious orders, it is man himself who should ascertain that there is the probability of harmfulness to his health through fasting. Thus, it is essential to study the Islamic perspective regarding the spiritual and social benefits of fasting and the boundaries for physical harmfulness in order to gain a better understanding of its different dimensions. Accordingly, this study aimed to clarify the meaning of fasting, the spiritual and social benefits of fasting, the meaning of harmfulness as well as the relationship between such concepts.

The Meaning of Fasting

Fasting is a form of Islamic worship which necessitates man to abstain from certain actions from dawn to sunset to seek nearness to God. Muslims are also obliged to abstain from eating, drinking, engaging in sexual intercourse, masturbation, false oath, slander and calumny to God, his prophets and Imams, inhaling thick dust, sinking the head in water, using non-solid substances (e.g. suppository), and deliberate vomiting- the detailed discussion of them is stated in books of jurisprudence (6).

Among these prohibitions, abstaining from eating and drinking is most likely to harm the body especially when man suffers from an illness. Since the holy Qur'an holds that the aim of abstaining from eating and drinking is reaching the level of virtue (1) which empowers man spiritually, the focus on the level of virtue at the expense of probable harmfulness to man's health should be studied carefully.

The Meaning of Harmfulness

The meaning of harmfulness hasn't been specified in religious discourse. Harmfulness is a concept determined by public's recognition, so when the public recognizes something as harmful, it could be dealt with through religious order; that is to say that when there involves considerable harmfulness to man, the applied religious order would be replaced by another one.

The considerable harmfulness is defined as the one whose damage is not naturally made up. For example, when man fasts, he becomes rather weak, but after he breaks his fast, this

weakness vanishes naturally, so fasting would not be considered harmful to his health. But, if man has to resort to some kind of treatment as a result of fasting, it is obvious that fasting could be harmful to his health; whether the effects of harmfulness are clear and there is a need for immediate treatment, or its effects are latent and observed after some time. Therefore, in medical recommendations, fasting is considered harmful to an individual's health when there is a need for any kind of medical treatment.

The Role of the Doctor and Patient in the Recognition of Harmfulness

Regarding the recognition of harmfulness, the doctor and patient's duties should be described clearly. Their main duties are as follows:

- Doctors, according to their specialization, have to evaluate the effects and consequences of thirst and hunger with regard to the month of the year in which Ramadan coincides. As mentioned before, fasting is a religious concept entailing different parts, and the main aspect that doctors deal with is related to hunger and thirst. Thus, as fasting is a religious concept, doctors can only examine the physical symptoms.
- In religious orders, it has been stated that it is only man who is responsible for recognizing whether fasting is harmful to his health or not, and the doctor's recognition alone would not be valid (5). Nevertheless, there is a widespread misconception regarding this order. Many people assume that since they have been assigned this responsibility, and the side effects of a probable illness due to fasting are not observed immediately, they ignore the doctor's recognition and fast with difficulty and afterwards they get into trouble. Obviously, such interpretation of this religious order is not correct. The exact meaning of this order is that it is only man who should reach a definite conclusion or a considerable probability that fasting would be harmful to his health perhaps through the doctor's recognition or his own understanding. However, there are some cases in which due to the variability of the conditions or unknown side effects of an illness, the doctor

himself assigns the responsibility to the patient to control these side effects while fasting. Therefore, when fasting could be harmful to man's health or delays his illness recovery and also when the burden of fasting is too much for him to tolerate, man should not fast even if he is not certain and merely presumes considerable harmfulness to his health in so doing (7).

- One of the problems that patients can be confused about is the controversy among doctors about the harmfulness of fasting to the patient's health. To clarify this issue, some points should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the patient should trust the doctor regarding his observation of medical ethics, and also he should ascertain that the doctor hasn't ignored the patient's religious beliefs as it is likely that the doctor isn't a Muslim or doesn't believe in fasting, but regarding medical ethics, he should respect his patient's beliefs. Secondly, the relation between the illness and the doctor's specialization is very important. Considering the noticeable medical advances, there are some cases in which different specialists express their viewpoints about an illness. As each doctor views the issue within his own perspective, different conceptualizations are formed, but it is the patient who has to draw a conclusion with the doctor's help. Eventually, if he arrives at a conclusion that there could be the likelihood of harmfulness to his health, he shouldn't fast. This is true with chronic diseases and pregnant women and their period of lactation. Therefore, the patient should trust his doctor based on two reasons; the doctor's observation of medical ethics, and the relevance of the doctor's scientific specialty.

Benefits of Fasting

Different scientists from different majors have dealt with the benefits of fasting as an important concept. The benefits of fasting are of two types. The first type of benefits are the ones which are achieved materially, regardless of the spiritual aspect of fasting, and the second type of benefits are the ones which are obtained through the intention of seeking nearness to God- the

spiritual and psychological aspects of fasting.

Many doctors admit the benefits of fasting to an individual's health. Generally, the main goal of religion is to guide man in approaching God and stating the material benefits is the minor goal of religion. So, the material benefits of religious orders should be studied in their specific conditions (8). As such, when the holy Qur'an talks about certain foods, it doesn't necessarily mean that they would be beneficial for everybody (9).

Besides, the benefits of abstaining from some habits- apart from eating and drinking- such as smoking and the like which are prohibited in Ramadan are undeniable. As man spends more time worshiping God in Ramadan through fasting, his power to control his temptations increases. Actually, fasting is a kind of exercise to control temptations which leads to spiritual empowerment- the true meaning of virtue in the Islamic religion (10). Accordingly, the non-material benefits of fasting in the holy month of Ramadan can be divided into two types:

- a. *The Spiritual Benefits:* Fasting is a form of worship whose intention is to seek nearness to God rather than achieving material and non-divine goals. When man is engaged in worshiping, his attention is directed to God and this could be an exercise for man to improve his spiritual power by withdrawing material goals. Thus, one of the benefits of fasting is creating an empowered spiritual man. This is especially true when the fasting individual accompanies his worship with prayers. Prayer is a form of conversation between man and God leading to an affectionate relationship between them; so that man doesn't view himself apart from God (11). As a result, the basic preliminaries for creating an individual who is spiritually empowered are formed.
- b. *The Social Benefits:* When Muslims fast at specific time in Ramadan, their spiritual motivation is formed collectively. The main social and familial benefits of fasting are the simultaneous gatherings of people both in the society and family for the act of worshiping God and having Sehri and Iftar. As such, the rates of many social disorders drop in Ramadan; the fact which has drawn the attention of a large number of

sociologists. Therefore, it could be concluded that by achieving closeness to God, not only can people reach spiritual rewards, but they also perform better in their social activities.

In short, the physical, social and psychological aspects of fasting should be taken into account. So, Islam has recommended that even those Muslims who are not able to fast avoid breaking their fasts openly in public during Ramadan, as it would reduce the positive social and psychological effects of fasting.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned issues, the following points should be taken into consideration:

1. Fasting is a religious concept, but harmfulness is a public concept; one should pay attention to their semantic boundaries.
2. Although medical science can be the major source for the recognition of harmfulness regarding hunger, thirst, and other physical side effects to man's health, it may fail to claim for the religious concept of fasting.
3. Making a decision about the harmfulness of fasting to man's health based on the medical recognition is within the responsibility of man himself.
4. One should not search for the benefits of fasting within medical domain, as fasting has vaster dimensions which are beyond medical

science. Some benefits of fasting fit in the spiritual domain, while others are social and behavioral. But it is noteworthy to say that achieving these benefits should not risk an individual's health.

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