

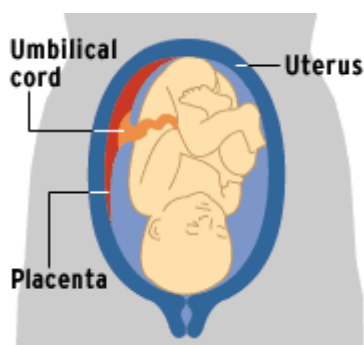
Fasting and Pregnancy

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As Muslims the time of Ramadhan is precious to all of us and is the only time of the year that calls on us to acknowledge the Creator and the natural laws by which our bodies run by. For the modern woman, there is a whole days agenda to get through and everything has to fit into that agenda. Allowing the workings of the body to take its natural course has just become another item to place on the agenda and sometimes the requests of the body is not well received when it has a mind of its own. Fasting beyond three days not only reduces the blood protein, lowers blood fats, possible increase of uric acid and here is as lower red blood count and iron level, but the period attracts a lot of questions about ones life and one develops a new sensitivity towards those around one (Haas p.8) The whole process of pregnancy adds additional demands on the body. Californian physician Gabriel Cousens describes fasting as "... a means to abstain from that which is toxic to the mind, body and soul. A way to understand this is that fasting is the elimination of physical, emotional and mental toxins from our organism, rather than simply cutting down on or stopping food intake. Fasting for spiritual purposes usually involves removing oneself from worldly responsibilities"(Haas p.3).

Pregnancy is an important period whereby the bonding between mother and child begins from conception bringing warmth, love, security and complete nutrition depending on the health and age of the mother. From a Western point of view it can be considered surprising how harsh



some Muslim women can be on their own bodies during pregnancy, assuming that fasting is compulsory on all healthy Muslims of responsible age. Every situation has been catered for if only we knew. We are reminded of this fact in Prophet Muhammed's Last Sermon when he informed his follower that he had completed for us the religion that is Islam and that we must turn to the two weighty things that is the Qur'an and the sunnah (the traditions of the Prophet). Muslim women around the world are living under differing circumstances some of which

undermines the health of the pregnant woman, Islam would not be so merciless as to impose such a hardship on those who have poor health or poor nutrition. In Islam, those who do not have to fast are:

- Woman in advanced of pregnancy, or in a stage where fasting is harmful
- Those who are breast-feeding
- Those who are menstruating and
- Those women who are in nifas.

If a pregnant woman or a breast-feeding woman fears for her health or the health of the unborn child, she can fast the same equivalent of days at another time or feed the poor to compensate. This is confirmed in the hadith "For those who can do it (with hard-ship) is a ransom, the feeding of one, that is indigent," he said: This was a concession granted to the aged man and woman who were able to keep fast; they were allowed to leave the fast and instead feed an indigent person for each fast; (and a concession) to pregnant and suckling woman when they apprehended harm (to

themselves)" (abu Da`wud 13 #115) in explanation of the Qur`anic verse 2: 184 of surat-ul Baqarah. Islamic fasting makes our bodied go into an elimination cycle by the act of not eating. Where there is toxicity present in the system, there are withdrawal symptoms like headaches, irritability or fatigue. In contemporary Western medicine, it is generally considered as a form of starvation and has even been considered as a factor towards eating disorders – do any of these arguments have a weight of truth?

The Effects of Fasting for Healthy Pregnant Women



'Eating for two' is usually the expression declared given to encourage the likelihood of a healthy mother and child, but how much real wisdom is there in this? Islamic fasting helps to address dietary abuse problems that in pregnancy can also affect the unborn child. It also helps to release some of the toxic build up which is attracted to the extra body fat that women carry. So therefore fasting detoxifies the body. Toxin release occurs from the kidneys, bladder, lungs, sinuses and skin discharging mucus from the intestinal tract, respiratory tract, sinuses and urine. The reality is that the benefits of fasting in

pregnancy varies from person-to-person depending on the condition of the body. Islam allows fasting for a healthy mother-to-be and allows an expectant mother who is not so predisposed the right not to fast surely belies that tale. This is possible because of the eating periods of *iftar* and *suhur* that allow for a balanced intake of nutrition. This was in fact ascertained by Dr. Soliman in Jordan at the University Hospital who tested 42 men and 26 women in 2984. Having tested all the features of the blood before testing he was able to compare differences. The only aspects of significance was the fact that men gained weight slightly higher than women and higher than their own weight before fasting and the same applied to their blood glucose levels. But all other elements i.e. cortisol, cholesterol, lipoprotein etc had remained the same (Crescent p. 1). In Islam, the safe period of fasting for pregnant women has been determined to be during the 1st and 2nd trimester. Clinical professor Dr. Shahid Athar suggests the 2nd Trimester (at 4 – 6 months) and then depending only on the health of the expectant woman and that she has permission and supervision from her obstetrician (Athar p.,4).

First Trimester

- By the third week the head and the spine begins to form at opposite ends growing toward each other until they fuse to form the "neural tube."
- In the fourth week tissue buds form that will later develop into the lungs, pancreas, liver and gallbladder. The ears, eyes and some facial structures begin to form. The cartilage, bone and muscles of the back emerge in paired bulges. The heart develops. It is during this period that the embryo is at the greatest risk of birth defects.
- During the fifth week, external ears become visible, the nose, the upper and lower jaws form, and the limbs. The walls of the chest and abdomen, and the umbilical cord develops.
- From six to eight weeks, the face becomes readily recognizable as a human. The neck forms, the torso and head become more erect, the tail disappears and the limbs become jointed, forming fingers and toes.

Second Trimester

- At eight weeks, the embryo is a full-formed, tiny baby, now called a fetus.
- By fifteen weeks, the fetus can kick, curl its fingers and toes, and squint its eyes. Genitals have developed and the kidneys work.
- Circulatory and urinary systems are operating, and the liver is producing bile. The reproductive organs of male or female have developed, but the gender of the fetus is difficult to distinguish externally.

Third Trimester

- Fat begins to accumulate, the placenta has stopped growing and cannot keep up with the growing need for nourishment.
- The brain develops very rapidly. In the last two months, a fatty substance called "myelin" develops speeding up transmission of nervous impulses.

In West Africa, it was observed that 90% of pregnant women fasted during Ramadhan. Twenty-two pregnant women, ten lactating women and ten non-pregnant women, were tested by medical researchers Prentice, Lamb, Lunn and Austin. It was found that the glucose level was significantly lower in women who were in their later stages of pregnancy than the control group. This is useful in incidences of Gestational pregnancy whereby the blood sugar level becomes higher than normal whilst pregnant but may return to normal after delivery. Body fat cannot form the glucose required by the body for energy and during the period of fasting, The process of ketosis takes place (which only occurs in fasting) preventing the loss of protein. Body glucose decreases and there is increased weight loss. One of the purposes of researching into pregnant fasting women is to assess whether the glucose level in blood during the fast can be used as a measure to screen for Gestational diabetes (Perucchini p.2). In a medical trial of 520 pregnant fasting women in Zurich, Switzerland the women's blood sugar was tested. Tested in the 24th and 28th week of pregnancy (Prentice p.1). The purpose of the trial was to see what risks and preventative measures could be taken in cases of gestational diabetes (diabetes during pregnancy due to increased intolerance of glucose) that is prevalent amongst Asian and African women. One method of treatment recommends dietary management under medical

supervision in fasting women. Periodic blood testing is carried out to assess the glucose level whilst fasting and after taking *iftar* in order to maintain necessary blood sugar levels, and adequate nutrition for the unborn child (healthlibrary p.2). Gestational diabetes can lead to a larger than normal fetus, stillbirth or a caesarian section (cebmh p.2).

With the difficulty in making up the fast at a later time, most women prefer to seize the opportunity to fast during the month of Ramadhan itself. Depending on the stress factors of ones domestic conditions which might lack psychological and domestic support to be on the safe side, it would be wiser to consider ones general health and to seek approval from ones doctor before making a decision. The intake of food should be balanced and the intake of fluids plenty. For instance it is often assumed that for nursing mothers fasting leads to dehydration therefore decreasing milk supply. Prentice and his team found in their study of nursing mothers in Nigeria who were fasting for Ramadhan that there was in fact no decrease in volume of milk due to the periods of *iftar* and *suhur* when a higher volume of fluids were consumed to over-compensate for the day time fast (Kellymom p.10). It just goes to show, between the *Qur'an*, the *sunnah* and women's knowledge of their own bodies, that more myths are too be broken in order to allow the natural laws passed down to us to put balance in our lives.

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