

Q: What do Muslims do during Ramadan?

A: Muslims usually wake before dawn to take a small meal called “suhoor”. They abstain from eating, drinking and sensual pleasures during the daylight hours of the blessed month. Muslims exert more effort in worship, praying, contemplating, helping others, giving charity, reciting the Quran (the holy book of the Muslims); many Muslims endeavor to complete the Quran’s recitation at least once during the month. At sunset, Muslims break their fast, usually with a big meal with family and friends. Many Muslims also attend the mosque at night, to engage in special night prayers called “taraweeh”.

Q: How did the fast during Ramadan become obligatory for Muslims?

A: The revelations from God to the Prophet Muhammad that would eventually be compiled as the Quran began during Ramadan in the year 610, but the fast of Ramadan did not become a religious obligation for Muslims until the year 624. The obligation to fast is explained in the second chapter of the Quran: “O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint... Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting...” (Chapter 2, verses 183 and 185)

Q: What do Muslims believe they gain from fasting?

A: Some of the main benefits of Ramadan are an increased compassion for those in need of the necessities of life, a sense of self-purification and reflection and a renewed focus on spirituality. Muslims also appreciate the feeling of togetherness shared by family and friends throughout the month. Perhaps the greatest practical benefit is the yearly lesson in self-restraint and discipline that can carry forward to other aspects of a Muslim’s life such as work and education.

Q: Why does Ramadan begin on a different day each year?

A: Because Ramadan is a lunar month, it begins about eleven days earlier each year. Throughout a Muslim’s lifetime, Ramadan will fall both during winter months, when the days are short, and summer months, when the days are long and the fast is more difficult. In this way, the difficulty of the fast is evenly distributed between Muslims living in the northern and southern hemispheres.

Q: What is Lailat ul-Qadr?

A: Lailat ul-Qadr (“Night of Power”) marks the anniversary of the night on which the Prophet Muhammad first began receiving revelations from God, through the angel Gabriel. An entire chapter in the Quran deals with this night: “We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Power: and what will explain to thee what the Night of Power is? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. Therein come down the angels and the Spirit by God’s permission, on every errand. Peace!... This until the rise of morn.” (Chapter 97) Muslims believe Lailat ul-Qadr is one of the odd-numbered nights in the last ten days of Ramadan.

Q: How can non-Muslim co-workers and friends help someone who is fasting?

A: Employers, co-workers and teachers can help by understanding the significance of Ramadan and by showing a willingness to make minor allowances for its physical demands. It is very important that Muslim workers and students be given time to attend Eid prayers at the end of Ramadan. Eid is as important to Muslims as Christmas and Yom Kippur are to Christians and Jews. A small token such as a card (there are Eid cards available from Muslim bookstores) or baked goods given to a Muslim co-worker during Eid ul-Fitr would also be greatly appreciated. Hospital workers should be aware that injections and oral medications might break the fast. Patients should be given the opportunity to decide whether or not their condition exempts them from fasting.

<https://www.vox.com/2017/5/25/11851766/what-is-ramadan-2019-start-date-muslim-islam-about>

It's a time of celebration and joy, to be spent with loved ones. At the end of Ramadan there's a big three-day celebration called Eid al-Fitr, or the Festival of the Breaking of the Fast.

Despite the hardship of fasting for a whole month, most Muslims (myself included) actually look forward to Ramadan and are a little sad when it's over..

5) Why do the dates of Ramadan change every year?

For religious matters, Muslims follow a lunar calendar — that is, one based on the phases of the moon — whose 12 months add up to approximately 354 days. That's 11 days shorter than the 365 days of the standard Gregorian calendar. Therefore, the Islamic lunar calendar moves backward approximately 11 days each year in relation to the regular Gregorian calendar.

So that means that the first day of the month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, moves backward by about 11 days each year.

This has a large impact on how people experience Ramadan from year to year. When Ramadan falls in the winter, it's much easier to fast: the days are shorter, which means you don't have to fast as long, and it's colder out, so not being able to drink water all day isn't as big of a deal because you're not sweating as much.

Conversely, when Ramadan falls in the summer, fasting can be brutal. In many Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa, summer temperatures can **reach levels** usually reserved for **the deepest bowels of hell**.

And in some Northern European countries such as Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (where, yes, there are Muslims), fasting can last an average of **20 hours or more** in the summer. (And in a few places above the Arctic Circle, the sun never actually sets in the summer. In these cases, **Muslim religious authorities have decreed** that Muslims can either fast along with the closest Muslim country or fast along with Mecca, Saudi Arabia.)

6) Okay, but why is there always confusion every year about exactly what day Ramadan starts on?

There's a reason "Ramadan start date" is one of the most-searched phrases every single year. That's because Muslims around the world do not know when exactly Ramadan is actually supposed to start. If you Google it, you'll see there's a little disclaimer under Google's answer that says "Dates may vary":

That also has to do with the moon — as well as disagreements about science, history, and tradition, plus a bit of geopolitical rivalry.

The beginning of each new month in the Islamic calendar starts on the new moon. Which means the month of Ramadan starts on the new moon. Simple enough, right?

Wrong.

If it's been a while since your high school astronomy class, here's a reminder of what the phases of the moon look like:



Back in Mohammed's day, in sixth-century Arabia, astronomical calculations weren't as precise as they are today, so people went by what they could see with the naked eye.

Since the new moon isn't actually super visible in the night sky (as you can see above), Muslims traditionally waited to start fasting until the small sliver of crescent moon became visible. There's even **a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed** about waiting to start the fast until you see the crescent. (Some people think this is why the star and crescent is the symbol of Islam, but the crescent was used as a symbol long before Islam.)

This method was a bit messy, though, since things like clouds or just the difficulty of spotting the moon in some locations often led to different groups starting their fast on separate days, even within the same country. Each community, village, or even mosque within the village might send its own guy out to look for the crescent, with rival groups arguing over whether the other guy really saw it.

Today, however, we have precise scientific calculations that tell us exactly when the new moon begins, and we don't need to wait until someone spots a tiny crescent in the sky. (In fact,

according to the **Oxford Dictionary of Islam**, "The need to determine the precise appearance of the hilal [crescent moon] was one of the inducements for Muslim scholars to study astronomy.")

So, problem solved! Except that some Muslim scholars believe we should still wait until the slight crescent moon is visible in the night sky because that's what Mohammed said to do and that's the way we've always done it.

Others argue that Islam has a strong tradition of reason, knowledge, and science, and that if Mohammed were around today, he'd choose the more precise scientific calculations over sending the guy at the mosque with the best eyesight outside to squint at the night sky.

To make things even more fun, some argue that the whole world should just follow the official moon-sighting decrees of Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and the location of its holiest sites. But not everyone thinks that's such a swell idea — especially rival countries like Pakistan and Iran, which balk at the idea of treating Saudi Arabia as the ultimate authority on anything having to do with Islam.

All this means that each year, Muslims around the world get to experience the delightful lunacy of "moon-sighting fighting." Indeed, it's such a familiar feature of Ramadan that there are memes about it:

Yes, Muslims use this meme too. There's really no escaping it.

7) Are there differences between how Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims observe Ramadan?

For the most part, no. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims fast during Ramadan. But there are some minor differences — for instance, **Sunnis break their daily fast at sunset**, when the sun is no longer visible on the horizon (but there's still light in the sky), whereas Shia wait until the redness of the setting sun has completely vanished and the sky is totally dark.

Shia also celebrate an additional holiday within the month of Ramadan that Sunnis do not. For three days — the 19th, 20th, and 21st days of Ramadan — Shia commemorate the martyrdom of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed who was both the revered fourth caliph of Sunni Islam and the first "legitimate" imam (leader) of Shia Islam.

Ali was assassinated in the fierce civil wars that erupted following the death of Mohammed over who should lead the Muslim community in his stead. On the 19th day of the month of Ramadan, while Ali was worshipping at a mosque in Kufa, Iraq, an assassin from a group of rebels who opposed his leadership fatally struck him with a poisoned sword. Ali died two days later.

Ali is a hugely important figure in Shia Islam. His tomb in nearby Najaf, Iraq, is the third-holiest site in Shia Islam, and millions of Shia make a pilgrimage there every year. Although Sunnis revere Ali as one of the four "rightly guided" caliphs who ruled after Mohammed's death, they do not commemorate his death or make a pilgrimage to his tomb.

The tomb of Ali ibn Abi Talib in Najaf, Iraq. *Toushiro, public domain*

8) What can I do to be respectful of my Muslim friends during Ramadan?

In some Muslim countries, it is a crime to eat and drink in public during the day in the month of Ramadan, even if you're not Muslim.

Of course, this is not the case in the United States, where we enjoy freedom of (and freedom from) religion. And most American Muslims, myself included, don't expect the non-Muslims around us to radically change their behavior to accommodate our religious fast during Ramadan.

I've had friends and co-workers who have chosen to fast along with me out of solidarity (or just because it seems "fun"), and that was sweet of them, but it's not something I ever expected people to do. (Plus, they usually last about four days before they decide solidarity is overrated and being thirsty for 15 hours is not even remotely "fun.")

All that said, there are things you can do, and not do, to make things a little easier for friends or colleagues who happen to be fasting for Ramadan. If you share an office with someone fasting, maybe eat your delicious, juicy cheeseburger in the office break room rather than at your desk, where your poor, suffering Muslim co-workers will have to smell it and salivate (if they even have enough moisture left in their bodies to salivate at that point).

Try to remember not to offer them a bite or a sip of what you're eating, because it's sometimes hard for us to remember that we're fasting and easy to absentmindedly accept and eat that Lay's potato chip you just offered us. But if you do, it's okay. We're not going to get mad or be offended (unless you're doing it on purpose, in which case, what is wrong with you?).

If you're having a dinner party and you want to invite your Muslim friends, try to schedule it after sunset so they can eat. Muslims don't drink alcohol or eat pork, but we usually don't mind being around it. (**Contrary** to **popular belief**, we are not scared of or allergic to pork; we just don't eat it. It's not like we're vampires and pork is garlic.) But do let us know if there's alcohol or pork in something so we don't accidentally consume it.

If you want to wish your Muslim friends or acquaintances a happy Ramadan or happy Eid al-Fitr, you're welcome to just say, "Happy Ramadan!" or "Happy Eid!" That's not offensive or anything. But if you want to show them you made an effort to learn more about their religion, the standard greetings are "Ramadan/Eid kareem" (which means "have a generous Ramadan/Eid") or "Ramadan/Eid mubarak" (which means "have a blessed Ramadan/Eid").

Even something as simple as learning one of those expressions and saying it with a smile to your Muslim friends will go a long way toward making them feel comfortable and welcome.