Light side of the moon

With its long hours of fasting with no food or drink during daylight hours and scorching temperatures, there's no denying that when Ramadan comes around in the summertime, it can be pretty tough on our bodies. That doesn't mean you have to give up your wellness goals, though—by approaching the Holy Month with a few clever tips and tricks, you can come out of it feeling as healthy as ever.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK.

With officials at Sharjah Planetarium announcing that the fasting period for Ramadan will be approximately 15 hours and 15 minutes at the start, and about 14 hours and 55 minutes towards the end, there's no doubt that this summer, the Holy Month is going to be a tough slog for those who are fasting. The practise of intermittent fasting is one that has been carried out for centuries, whether for religious reasons, health or weight loss reasons, or even before a medical procedure—and experts have long debated its pros and cons. Throw in the fact that the scorching hot sun and soaring temperatures of the Middle Eastern summer can also take their toll on our bodies and it seems inevitable that our health status should get set for a temporary downturn... right? Well, not necessarily—all you have to do is play it smart, experts claim. We're here to help you navigate the tricky waters and ensure that come Eid, your physical state will be just as strong as your spiritual one.

HYDRATE, HYDRATE, HYDRATE

Probably one of the largest concerns when it comes to Ramadan in the summertime, staying hydrated is absolutely essential to your health—if you don't believe us, check out our feature on page 53. With water making up more than two thirds of the human body, keeping everything from our joints to our eyes lubricated and flushing out waste, it's no wonder that the risks of dehydration are a serious cause for concern. While the average person probably won't get to this point, severe dehydration can lead to anything from seizures to brain damage or even death, and it's essential that we ensure our body is getting enough fluids —even if you can't take any in during daytime hours during the Holy Month.

Fluid intake requirements vary from person to person, but during non-fasting hours it's important to drink as much as you can. Don't just restrict it to food though—foods such as soups, fruits and vegetables all contain plenty of water, and filling up on these can be great ways to meet your needs. While sweetened beverages such as sodas, fruit juices and other traditional Ramadan drinks such as sweet teas and coffees or Qamar Il Deen —a thick, rich apricot-based drink—do count as part of your water intake, try not to indulge in too many of them as they could wreak havoc on your waistline, leading to other health issues as well. "Limit these to no more than one eight ounce cup a day, since calories and sugar easily add up," advises Dr. Leila Smaily MA, RD, Bsc., a Clinical Dietician at City Centre Clinic. Your caffeine intake is another one to watch, even if your energy levels are flailing, since this could actually deplete your water levels without you even realising it. "Caffeine is a diuretic and stimulates faster water loss through urination, so it's worth avoiding caffeine-based drinks such as tea, coffee and Cola," Dr. Smaily explains. Instead, try and stick to water where possible, and always break your fast with a drink. It might even help you control your calorie intake: "Breaking your fast with water or other hydrating foods will prevent the urge to binge on less nutritious, high-fat foods and replenish for lost fluids," she continues.

CHOOSE FOODS WISELY

Come mealtime, dates are a traditional food with which to break your fast for good reason. Having a few dates—three, to be specific—will give you an instant burst of energy and are a great source of fibre. Once you're ready to tuck into Iftar, remember to pace yourself and focus on a variety of balanced foods that are good for you. "Food intake during Ramadan should be simple and not differ too much from your normal diet, covering all of the food groups: Grains and breads, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, proteins, and some oils and sweets," Dr. Smaily says, continuing: "When there are only so many hours to eat, make every calorie count by choosing foods that are rich in nutrients. Your meals should consist of healthy carbohydrates, lean sources of protein, vegetables, fruits, low-fat dairy and healthy fats. Avoid fried foods, pastries and other items with too much fat and sugar content that won't deliver much in terms of nutrition."

While it can be tempting to reach for high-calorie, sugary treats after going for so many hours without food or drink, these serious spikes in intake can lead to weight gain or even obesity. In a study published in the journal *Metabolism*, researchers observed what happened when people skipped meals, yet continued to eat the same amount as they would in a normal day when they finally did sit down to eat. The study—which ran over a four month period—found that doing so resulted in considerable metabolic changes that could pose risks to our health, including elevated fasting glucose levels and a delayed insulin

response—both of which could lead to diabetes if they persisted over a long-term period. And in a region where diabetes is an ever-growing concern—according to figures from the International Diabetes Foundation, one in ten adults in the Middle East are suffering from the disease—it's more important than ever that we take precautions to prevent going down that road where we can. "Even though Ramadan is the month of fasting, most people treat it as the month of feasting, increasing their total caloric intake and leading to weight gain," warns Dr. Smaily. With so many tempting Iftars and Suhours offered around town, it's easy to be tempted into over-indulging at an all-you-can-eat buffet, but exercising restraint is important for more than just watching your waistline: "The underlying message behind Ramadan is self-discipline and self-control. Don't let your diet fall apart at the end of the day. Those fasting should have at least two meals a day—the pre-dawn meal (Suhour) and a meal at dusk (Iftar), and one small snack a few hours after Iftar," Dr. Smaily says.

So what's a girl to do when hunger pangs strike? "While you can't completely prevent hunger pangs from happening, you can delay them by eating [plenty of] protein and fibre at Suhour. Examples of protein-rich foods include eggs, cheese, peanut butter, beans and meats. Oats, whole wheat bread, apples and pears are also high in fibre, and are great choices to include in your Suhour [meal]. Besides keeping you full, fibre helps to keep your digestive system regular," Dr. Smaily adds. Choosing complex carbohydrates is another wise move—not only will they help keep you fuller for longer, they'll help you maintain more energy throughout the day. "These are foods that that help release energy slowly during the long hours of fasting such as barley, wheat, oats, millet, semolina, beans, lentils, and wholegrain flour," Dr. Smaily says. High-fibre foods are another must: "Fibre-rich foods are digested slowly, and these include bran, cereals, whole wheat, grains and seeds, potatoes with the skin on, vegetables such as green beans, and almost all fruit, including apricots, prunes and figs. Including [these foods] in your Suhour will keep you fuller during the fasting hours," she adds. Another great option? Yoghurt: "Low-fat yoghurt is a great source of protein and calcium and will help prevent thirst throughout the day, [not to mention] help keep your system regular!"

STAY ACTIVE

Aside from maintaining a healthy diet, staying fit is another key component. While the speed at which deconditioning can take place depends on several factors, including the individual's existing fitness level, studies have found that aerobic power and muscle gains can decline in a matter of weeks or months respectively. That's not to say that you can't take a break, or take it easy for a little while—but the key is not quitting completely, and just cutting back on intensity, rather than letting your exercise drop off entirely throughout the entire Ramadan period.

In fact, experts at Gold's Gym UAE believe that the physical changes that result from fasting can actually work in your favour, claiming that Ramadan can actually help us lose weight and body fat while preserving any muscles we've

SKIN IS IN

As comical as he may have been, Derek Zoolander's insistence that moisture is the essence of beauty is true—like every other organ in our body, the cells in our skin need water to function at their best and if you aren't getting enough hydration, your skin could be left dry, tight and flakey, not to mention more prone to wrinkles. While moisturisers containing ingredients such as hyaluronic acid—which helps naturally draw and retain more water into the skin—and certain oils can help, a decreased fluid intake throughout the month of Ramadan could also have detrimental effects on the condition of your skin. Try these tips from skincare experts Jergens to ensure your skin's radiance doesn't have to suffer while you're fasting, and you'll be glowing by the time Eid rolls around:

1. Always include your five-a-day: "Vegetables and fruits are rich in vitamins A, B and C, which are essential components for maintaining beautiful skin. These vitamins can help fade brown spots, smooth skin roughness and boost hydration of the skin."
2. Drink water as much as possible: "Drinking water is not only essential for your skin but for your overall health. Simply, your skin is made out of cells and your cells are made out of water, so the lack of water in your body will slow down the function of your cells. Eventually, the lack of water will cause your skin to become dry and flaky. Therefore, make sure to drink at least eight glasses of water between your Iftar and Suhour meals to balance out the water consumption of your body."
3. Moisturise your skin on a daily basis: "Since your body will not be getting any nutrients during your fasting time, your skin needs more from your daily moisturisers," Jergens advises—they recommend their Musk scented lotion, which helps heal dry skin with increased moisture content, so your skin will be not only left silky smooth but also delicately perfumed with a scent that's just right for the season.

HELPER'S HIGH

Ramadan is a period in which to celebrate community, do good deeds and embrace charity and kindness. Doing altruistic deeds can do more than just give you the warm and fuzzies—it's also good for your health. Research from the University of California at Berkely and the University of Texas at Austin has found that those who volunteer live longer than those who don't, while volunteering for 100 hours or more a year was linked to lower levels of depression and mortality. Studies have found that performing acts of kindness can release feel-good chemicals in the body such as oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin, which can help lead to reduced blood pressure, less anxiety and increased happiness.

worked hard for. To do it safely, they recommend keeping your workouts short—between 30 to 60 minutes at a time—and opting for routines that involve low-intensity resistance training, keeping up your cardiovascular activities such as walking or cycling, going for a jog, or even using a jumping rope at home for 30 minutes. These will help you to keep burning calories and building stamina. They also recommend staying flexible and fit through other low-impact, strength building exercises such as Pilates or yoga. "Don't do high-intensity exercises like high speed running, stepper and heavy weight-lifting as it can lead to joint or muscle injuries and complications like low blood pressure, hypoglycaemia and dizziness," they warn, adding that it's also not a great idea to exercise while you're fasting. Dr. Smaily agrees: "It's not recommended to exercise during fasting hours. Exercise when you're able to drink, and make sure you drink enough water to compensate for any water loss," says, pointing out that it's also wise to keep your activity moderate: "A brisk walk is fine, but it's not a good idea to run a marathon or swim the [equivalent] of the English Channel on a day when you're not eating or drinking as much as usual."

Point taken, but how often should we aim to exercise during Ramadan then? "To maintain your fitness during Ramadan, [we recommend] exercising four to five times a week," say trainers at Gold's Gym, adding that doing so before Suhour or after Iftar is your best bet. If you're determined to work out during fasting hours, pick your time wisely: Opt for the period right before you're able to break your fast, so that you're able to replenish your body with the necessary fluids and foods immediately afterwards.

FIND A BALANCE

All of the healthy eating and exercise in the world won't stop the scheduling changes of Ramadan from wreaking havoc on your health if you don't also ensure you're getting enough sleep. "Families and friends often gather to break the fast and visit until the wee hours—then get up early for another meal before the fast begins again. This can affect one's concentration and work performance, especially since their morning coffee is missing!" Dr. Smaily points out. According to a study carried out by the Sleep Disorders Center at the College of Medicine at King Saud University, fasting neither affects quality of sleep nor does it cause excessive sleepiness during the day, provided the individual is getting sufficient sleep at night and, where needed, taking a short nap during the day. Avoiding excessive eating at night prior to sleep can also help improve sleep quality.

It can be hard sticking to a healthy eating regime, exercise programme or even maintaining a normal schedule during Ramadan, not least because of the social impact or change in lifestyle created during the Holy Month. But if you set yourself a list of goals, be it day by day or week by week, it could be a great time to scale back on the hectic demands of your regular schedule, and be productive in ways that you might not normally—it just takes a bit of planning, creativity and dedication. Ramadan Kareem!

DID YOU KNOW?

One of the five pillars of Islam, fasting during Ramadan is obligatory for every able Muslim: key word, able. While the practise is expected of those in good health, there are certain conditions in which exemption is counted. These include children under the age of puberty, those with mental health issues, those who are too sick or old and feeble to bear the hardships of a fast (in which case they can postpone their fast to when they're well enough to make up for it, or offer another needy Muslim a meal a day instead, respectively), pregnant women or those nursing children if it would endanger their own health or the health of their children or women who are menstruating. Both of the latter can, again, make up for it at a later time, with each day of not observing the fast counting for an extra day of fasting when they are able.

TOP IFTAR PICKS

THE ADDRESS DUBAI MARINA

The hotel's Constellation Ballroom is once again decked out in all manner of Ramadan themed décor and their tent boasts plenty of seating along with live cooking stations, making it ideal for large groups. Iftar is Dhs170 from sunset until 9pm, while Suhour is served à la carte from 8pm onwards. Call 800 233 7377.

JW MARRIOTT MARQUIS DUBAI

With the ballroom transformed into an opulent lounge in tones of gold and cream, this makes for a gorgeous setting in which to enjoy classic Arabian cuisine while live Oud players provide musical entertainment. Iftar is Dhs195 from sunset until 8:30pm, and Suhour is served à la carte from 8:30pm. Call 04 414 3000.

TOM & SERG

For an entirely non-traditional take on Iftar, Tom & Serg is embracing Ramadan by opening from 7pm until late for a juicy roast dinner of meats and fish, "crazy gravy" and all the trimmings. Call 056 474 6812 or visit www.ruletheroastdubai.com.

COMPTOIR 102

Offering an Iftar with a difference this Ramadan, Comptoir 102's candle-lit environment promises healthy and organic (and vegetarian-friendly!) dishes, open every day from Iftar til late. From Dhs90, call 04 385 4555.

EMIRATES PALACE HOTEL

Boasting one of the most grand Iftars in the country, Emirates Palace's pavilion, Ramadan Nights by Arabtec at the Palace, is back for the second year running. The custom-built arena overlooks the beach on one side and the hotel's façade on the other, meaning your view will be spectacular, while signature dishes from the hotel's much-beloved Emirati restaurant, Mezlai, are the main focus. Iftar is Dhs265 per person from sunset to 9pm, while Suhour is served à la carte from 9:30pm until 1:30am, with a minimum spend of Dhs150. Just don't forget to abide by the strict dress code policy. Call 02 690 9000.

QBARA

Loved just as much for its sophisticated surroundings and excellent ambiance as its upscale take on classic Emirati food, Qbara is offering an Iftar menu for Dhs180 comprised of drinks such as Kammaruddin, Jaleb, Karkadi and Laban Airan, not to mention soups, a great selection of fresh salads, and for your mains, Sayadiha, chicken tagine and national favourite, slow-cooked "Ouzi-style" lamb. Call them at 800 QBARA or visit www.qbara.ae.

JUMEIRAH ZABEEL SARAY

Throughout the month of Ramadan, MusicHall is transformed into Masrah Ramadan, a tribute to Arabic Culture created by Michael Elefteriades. Here, you'll be able to enjoy an à la carte Suhour menu made up of a wide Arabic mezze selection and some tasty main courses, that are accompanied by live performances designed to complement the mood and atmosphere. The show features talent from across the Arab world and is a great way to celebrate the Holy Month. Open every night from 9pm to 2am, with a minimum spend of Dhs190 on food and beverages. Call 04 453 000 or visit www.jumeirah.com.

THE FARM AT AL BARARI

With a focus on fine produce and good cuisine rather than over-indulgence, the award-winning The Farm at Al Barari is an ideal place for a wholesome (and family-friendly) Iftar. They've added a selection of Arabic fare to their regular ethically-sourced menu and the lush hideaway is the perfect place in which to embrace the Holy Month's theme of internal reflection. Iftar is served from sunset until 1:30am. Call 04 392 5660.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHUTTERSTOCK AND SUPPLIED.

Breaking your fast at home? Try one of these Iftar-friendly regional recipes...

Smooth Sailing

A staple across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, tender eggplant and plenty of vitamin B6-loaded garlic and antioxidant-rich tomatoes are filled with flavour for a delicious, comforting meal. It'll hit the spot just like lasagne would but with a whole lot more dietary fibre!

Eggplant Moussaka

Recipe adapted from Chef Kareem Ali Mohamed Ali, Chef de Partie at Mazina, The Address Dubai Marina

2 kg eggplant
200 ml tomato sauce
4 pieces sliced onion
1 tsp chopped garlic
100 ml olive oil
1 tsp salt
1 tsp white pepper
1 Tbsp dried mint
2 pieces sliced tomato, for garnish
5 boiled chickpeas, for garnish

1. Preheat your oven to 180°C.

2. Clean the eggplant, cut it into cubes and deep fry it. Place it to one side in a strainer, until all of the excess oil drains off.

3. Sweat the sliced onion and garlic in a pan with a dash of olive oil. Add in the tomato sauce, and cook for a further 10-15 minutes, adding seasoning to taste. You can replace the tomato sauce with fresh tomato chunks and fresh puréed tomatoes if you wish.

4. Place the eggplant onto an oven tray and pour the tomato sauce on top of the eggplant evenly. Arrange the cooked chickpeas on top, along with the sliced tomatoes and dried mint.

5. Place into the oven for 10 minutes, and once done, remove immediately and let it cool down.

6. Once cooled, serve with additional fresh mint leaves.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS.

Ocean Fresh

Hearty Ramadan delights don't have to be restricted to meats—seafood dishes make an excellent lighter alternative, and a marinated juicy fillet of regional favourite Hammour, cooked until tender in a tagine, makes for an exciting take on a simple key ingredient.

Fish Tajine

Recipe adapted from Chef Kareem Ali Mohamed Ali, Chef de Partie at Mazina, The Address Dubai Marina

1 fillet Hammour fish
200 g Tahina
150 ml water
1 tsp chopped garlic
100 ml olive oil
1 tsp salt
3 sliced mixed capsicums
1 tsp salt
1 Tbsp red chilli paste
1 Tbsp fresh coriander
1 Tbsp cumin powder
1 sliced onion
1 tsp white pepper
1 Lemon
5-10 Cashew nuts, for garnish
5 leaves fresh mint, for garnish

1. Sauté the onion, garlic, mixed capsicum and coriander. While sautéing, mix together the water, Tahini and chilli paste. Put the sauce on the vegetables and mix it well, and put it on a slow fire to cook for 10-15 minutes.

2. Marinate the fish with salt, lemon, white pepper and olive oil. Place it in the tagine and into a pre-heated oven for 8 minutes at 165°C, then when done, remove the entire tagine with the fish inside it.

3. Once cool, serve the tagine topped with the fish, garnishing it before serving cold.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS.

New Traditions

A classic favourite that's stood the test of time, add a twist to your beloved hommous—crammed with plenty of fibre thanks to the chickpeas—with a touch of fresh chilli and parsley, then enjoy it with freshly cut crudités for a satisfying crunch.

Hommous Beiruti

Recipe adapted from Chef Kareem Ali Mohamed Ali, Chef de Partie at Mazina, The Address Dubai Marina

240 g Hommous Tahina
1 tsp Chopped Garlic
1 Tbsp chopped parsley
1 tsp chopped green chilli
1 tsp cumin powder
1 lemon
1 Handful foul medamas, for garnish
1 splash olive oil, for garnish
1 sprig fresh parsley, for garnish

1. Mix all of the ingredients except for the garnishes together with the hommous tahini until they are smooth. Mash together with a mortar and pestle for a more chunky texture, or use a food processor for more creamy results.

2. Garnish with foul, a swirl of olive oil, and a sprig of parsley and serve with crudités and warm or cold whole wheat pita bread.