

Digestive health during Ramadan

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THE aroma of freshly prepared kuih, rich gravies and sweet drinks fills the room. After hours of fasting, it is tempting to indulge. But by midnight, you are bloated, uncomfortable or struggling with heartburn again. For many, Ramadan is a time of spiritual renewal and an opportunity to embrace a more mindful, balanced approach to physical well-being. However, some may experience digestive discomfort. Acid reflux, bloating, constipation and fatigue can sometimes occur during the fasting month because of dietary choices during sahur and iftar. Sunway Medical Centre, Sunway City consultant gastroenterologist and hepatologist Dr Sheikh Anwar Abdullah says fasting is an opportunity to reset gut health, rather than straining it.

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Sunway Medical Centre, Sunway City consultant gastroenterologist and hepatologist Dr Sheikh Anwar Abdullah says fasting is an opportunity to reset gut health, rather than straining it.

"The digestive system experiences a period of rest when people choose to fast. The body produces less acid and experiences decreased inflammatory triggers, which lead to improved gut health."

But we often undo these benefits by overeating or neglecting hydration and fibre, he explains.

Research supports what many experience firsthand. A study found an

increase in gastrointestinal complaints, such as bloating, acid reflux and constipation, during Ramadan.

The reasons are familiar — heavy meals, oily and spicy food, dehydration and long gaps between eating.

"The biggest culprits are usually overeating at iftar, consuming deep-fried or spicy foods, not drinking enough water and skipping fibre. Another contributing factor is reduced physical activity," says Dr Sheikh Anwar.

With altered sleep patterns and lower energy levels, many people move less during Ramadan, which also slows digestion and worsens constipation, he adds.

START WITH SAHUR

Skipping sahur or opting for fast food may seem convenient, but this often backfires.

Dr Sheikh Anwar advises a balanced, slow-digesting sahur that sustains energy and protects the gut.

The ideal sahur includes complex carbohydrates like oats or brown rice, protein from eggs, fish or tofu, and water-rich fruits, such as watermelon or cucumber.

Yogurt can also benefit gut health due to its probiotics, provided you do not have lactose intolerance.

The major thing to avoid during sahur is spicy, greasy food that irritates the stomach lining and increases the risk of reflux later in the day, he says.

At iftar, Dr Sheikh Anwar recommends easing the stomach back into digestion.

Sugary drinks, excessive fried food and salty dishes may feel satisfying, but often lead to bloating and indigestion.

"Start with water and a few dates, then pause perhaps for maghrib before eating a proper meal.

"Eat slowly. A balanced plate with complex carbs, lean protein and some healthy fats is ideal," he advises.

Late-night eating is another common issue. Merch, the post-larawih supper often shared among family and friends, is a cherished Ramadan tradition in Malaysia, but it should be done moderately.

Dr Sheikh Anwar says one should keep it light during merch. Ideally, try to leave two to three hours between your last meal and bedtime to reduce acid reflux or further digestive issues.

HYDRATION IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

Constipation is one of the most frequent Ramadan complaints, often caused by inadequate fluid intake.

Global health guidance shows many people consume less than their daily water intake needs during the fasting month.

Proper hydration not only supports digestion, but also helps prevent headaches and fatigue.

"Aim for at least two to 2.5 litres of water between iftar and sahur. Sip regularly instead of drinking large amounts at once. Include water-rich fruits and avoid too much caffeine, which can worsen dehydration," says Dr Sheikh Anwar.

While fasting is safe for most healthy adults, a study shows that it may aggravate pre-existing gastrointestinal conditions.

Those managing conditions, such as ulcerative colitis, duodenal ulcers, upper GI bleeding and moderate-to-severe liver cirrhosis, may have a higher risk of developing flares and complications associated with fasting. They require careful monitoring and guidance from healthcare professionals, says Dr Sheikh Anwar.

BEYOND RAMADAN

Ramadan does not have to be a temporary reset. Dr Sheikh Anwar encourages Malaysians to maintain healthier routines even after the fasting month ends.

"Continue eating mindfully, staying hydrated and spacing out meals. Older adults especially should ensure enough protein and fibre to maintain muscle strength and digestive health," he says.

It is important to go beyond cravings at iftar and instead focus on what truly nourishes the body.

A healthier gut supports a healthier fasting experience and a more meaningful month of reflection.

"Fasting and health go hand-in-hand. Eat in moderation, hydrate well and listen to your body.

"If something feels off, do not push through the pain and immediately get it checked," he says.

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Proper hydration not only supports digestion but also helps prevent headache and fatigue. PICTURE CREDIT: PRESSPHOTO — FREEMIX



Avoid deep-fried or oily foods. PICTURE CREDIT: RAWPIXEL.COM — FREEMIX

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