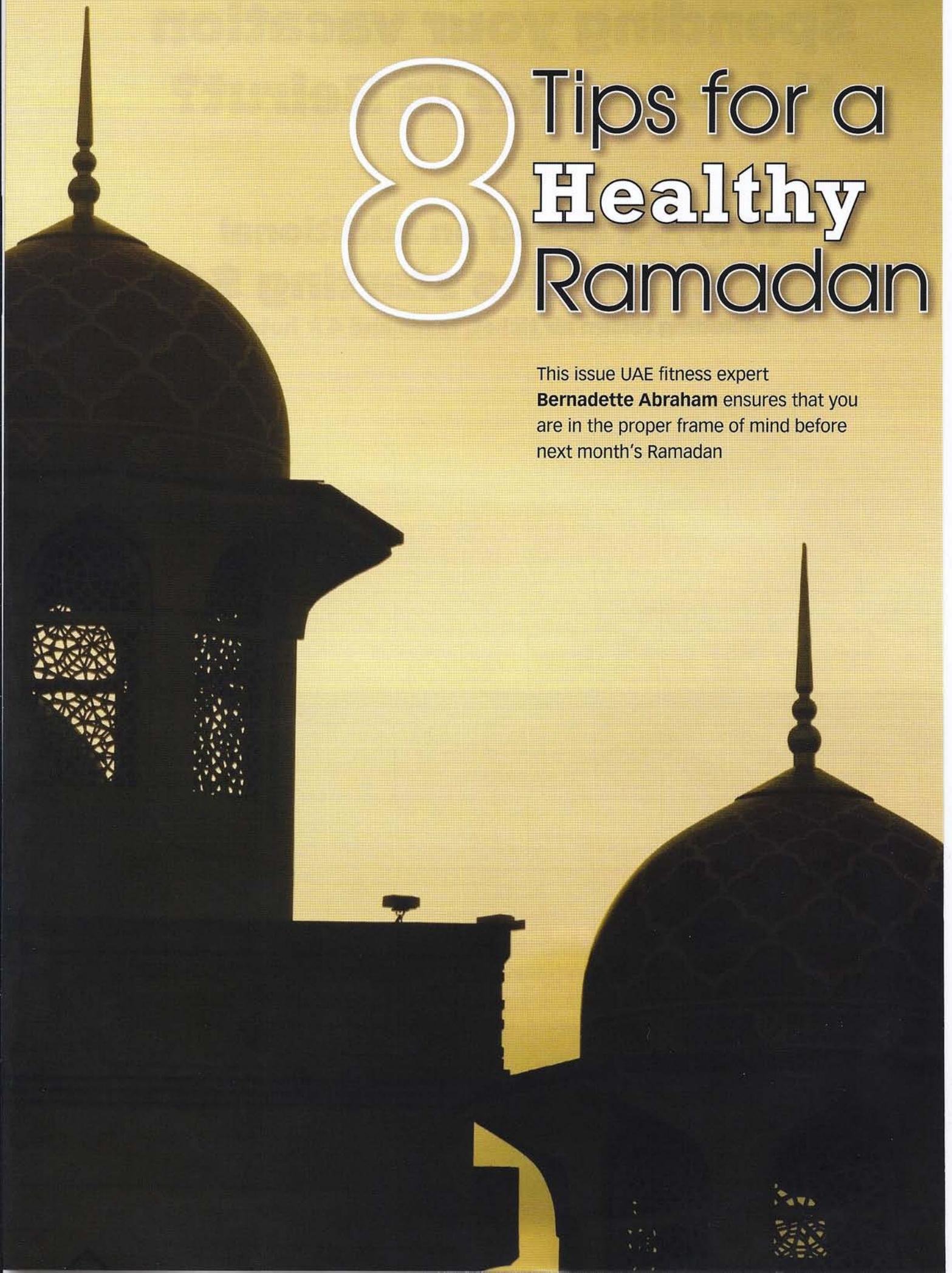


# 8 Tips for a Healthy Ramadan

This issue UAE fitness expert **Bernadette Abraham** ensures that you are in the proper frame of mind before next month's Ramadan



**R**amadan, the Islamic Holy month, is a time for all Muslims to cleanse their bodies and souls through prayers, inner-reflection, and self-control. It is a chance for one to appreciate the life they have been given, and to sympathize and offer charity to the less fortunate. From a health standpoint however, these thirty days can wreak havoc on a person's body if not careful with the decisions made following iftar (breaking the fast). Feeling lethargic and tired after a long day of fasting and work leads the majority to laze the entire evening, especially after a very large meal. Unfortunately, the consequences can be very harsh; headaches, fatigue, indigestion, intestinal discomfort, and certainly unaccounted weight gain. It is possible however, to avoid these outcomes and make Ramadan a more spiritual and health conscious month by following these simple tips that will help get you moving!

### Tip1: Slowly Break the Fast

The Maghrib Athan (sunset call to prayer) signals the beginning of sunset and the first community feast of the day. Although it is a natural feeling to want to indulge, it is important to remember that your system has been without food for twelve hours and needs time to adjust. Instead of eating a very large meal at once, opt for something lighter, such as dried dates, skimmed milk, freshly squeezed fruit juices, or even a bowl of traditional lentil soup with a glass of water to regain energy and prepare the digestive

system for nutrient processing. A more moderate meal can then be eaten an hour or two later.

### Tip2: Exercise Timing is Key

Although it is not advisable to exercise while fasting because of the high risk of dehydration, there are other times during the day that are perfect for keeping fit. Low intensity exercises such as walking, swimming, pilates, and yoga are great options right before the call to prayer and iftar. Exercise is known to curb the appetite for a short period of time; so it can help hold off cravings and allow you to make healthier food choices later on. However, it is extremely important to keep the intensity low enough to avoid excessive sweating and dehydration.

An ideal time for working out is right after iftar. Eating something light, like dates and a glass of milk, a piece of fruit and yogurt, or a bowl of lentil soup can give you the necessary energy to exercise. It is also important to drink plenty of water while exercising to replenish the body's fluids. A meal high in protein and complex carbohydrates one to two hours following an exercise session is ideal to maintain and build muscle strength. For example, grilled chicken breast or fish are high in protein and a side salad or steamed vegetables with steamed brown rice are good sources of fiber-rich carbohydrates.

For the early risers, exercising right before suhour (sunrise) is also a valid option. Not only does it help you jump start your day, but a light snack, such as a low fat yogurt and fruit afterwards can help you feel more energized and less sluggish during the day.

### Tip3: Change Your Mindset

Although it is difficult, it is not impossible to resist the fried nibbles and the sweet temptations during Ramadan.

While some people never give a second thought about their food selections, others are constantly playing mind games to justify the choices they make. Justifications such as "I've been fasting all day and deserve to indulge" or "I'll only eat a piece of cake now and skip dessert tomorrow" are very common but often accompanied with feelings of guilt. The mind is a very powerful tool that can help overcome these situations if you change your way of thinking. Ramadan is the perfect time to practice self-control and discipline by training your mind. It is human nature to want something that you cannot have; it all comes down to self-control. Therefore, if you can predict and pre-resolve future situations, the temptation becomes less appealing and is no longer a threat. For example, if you make the decision beforehand to refrain from eating dessert, tell yourself "I don't want dessert" instead of "I can't have dessert". It becomes easier to walk away from the dessert table and feel empowered as opposed to feeling guilty. It is all about controlling your mindset; simple, yet highly effective if practiced correctly.

### Tip4: Keep a Food Log

A person usually underestimates the amount of food consumed in a day, so it makes sense to keep a food diary for accountability. When a person is conscious of the foods they eat, healthier decisions are typically made. Recording your food may seem like a major task, but it only takes a minute or so after each meal. Also make sure to write down the time of the meal and your mood. This can help identify poor eating habits associated with your mood. For example, some people find comfort in

eating ice cream or something sweet when they are feeling sad. Review the diary on a daily basis and make the necessary changes and substitutions the following day. If you are not familiar with the different food groups and nutrients, seek the advice of a certified personal trainer or dietician to make sure you are eating well-balanced meals. Once healthy eating becomes customary, a mental log can be kept instead.

### Tip5: Drink the Right Liquids

Frequent family gatherings, community congregations, and social visits during Ramadan can lead to increased consumption of tea and coffee between the hours of dusk and dawn. The diuretic properties found in tea and coffee can present serious risks of dehydration if water intake is inadequate. Too much caffeine can also affect the absorption of essential minerals including iron, magnesium, zinc and potassium, and the B vitamins. It is important to drink plenty of clean water in order to balance the body's fluid levels. A healthy practice is to drink water with every meal or at least in accompaniment of the tea or coffee. Limiting the intake of tea and coffee can be monitored with the help of a food diary, but be ready to experience mild to severe headaches if you are a regular tea and coffee drinker. Caffeine acts as a vasoconstrictor, which decreases circulation in the blood vessels of the brain. The sudden decrease of caffeine increases the blood circulation and may cause headaches. Fortunately, a gradual decrease of caffeine intake two to three weeks prior to the start of Ramadan can help minimize the headaches.



**Ramadan is the ideal month to bring the whole family together**

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**Tip6: Avoid the Temptation Altogether**

It is best to avoid foods that are fried and high in saturated fat, as well as anything that is refined and high in sugar. Although they taste good, fat-laden foods have many negative side-effects like indigestion, lethargy and easy weight gain. Diets high in saturated fat have also been linked with higher risks of developing cardiovascular diseases. Based on these facts, it is best to fill your plate with lean sources of protein and fiber-rich carbohydrates. Lean proteins include skinless chicken breast, turkey breast, fish, egg-whites, and low-fat or fat-free dairy products. Vegetarians can obtain lean sources of protein from beans, lentils, pulses, tofu, and certain nuts. Fiber-rich foods are slow to digest which can help a person feel satiated longer. These include whole-wheat breads and pastas, whole grains, and all varieties of vegetables.

Sweets are usually the major pitfalls for keeping healthy during Ramadan. In addition to being high in calories, the surge of sugar into the bloodstream can trigger hypoglycemia and can contribute to insulin resistance. Diabetics and those who are seeking weight loss should strive to keep their blood sugar levels stable. The insulin spike caused by high amounts of sugar creates a blood sugar deficit shortly after. This rise-and-fall effect can lead people to choose foods higher in fat and sugar. Although it may be difficult to avoid sweets completely during Ramadan, remember to practice moderation. Fruits, which are naturally sweet and rich in vitamins, minerals, and anti-oxidants, are always great alternatives.

**Tip7: Substitute Starches with Vegetables**

Refined foods like white bread and white rice are very popular in the Middle Eastern cuisine, but they can contribute to weight

gain if eaten in abundance. Fortunately, there are simple ways to reduce the amount of starchy carbohydrates consumed during Ramadan. First of all, it is recommended to switch all white refined foods with whole wheat or whole grain varieties, such as brown rice instead of white rice. Secondly, vegetables are great alternatives for bread. For example, instead of eating tabouleh with pita bread, opt for lettuce or raw cabbage, which compliment the dish very well. Hummus can also be used as a vegetable dip for carrots, celery, cucumbers, green peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, and any other vegetable, which can help increase your vegetable intake.

Although many dishes incorporate white rice as the main ingredient like stuffed zucchini or stuffed grape leaves, some dishes separate the rice from the entrée. Just keep portions under control. Starchy carbohydrates like rice and pasta should be limited to a cupped hand. Limit the amount of

white rice and fill the plate with more vegetables.

**Tip8: Move More**

Becoming more active does not mean having to spend an hour at the gym everyday. Simple changes in your daily routine can make a difference; take the stairs, park the car far from the destination, and take a brisk walk after iftar for example. Shopping is a great activity since it requires alot of walking. Just remember to walk up the escalators instead of letting it do the work for you! Exchange television with other activities like cleaning up after a meal or playing cards with family and friends. With a little effort and self-control, Ramadan can truly detoxify your body and help shed a few unwanted pounds.

Ramadan Kareem!

For more great tips, contact Bernadette Abraham at 050-283-2020 or visit [www. BernaciseMe.com](http://www.BernaciseMe.com)