



Muslim families getting together to break the fast.

Ramadan and the other communities

Here, cultural awareness exists, to varying degrees. Shaheen confirms that most of the people she knows are aware of the Ramadan and that Muslims have to do it - "Most people don't think about it. They know that Muslims are going to fast and that's it". Abdullah agrees that most people know about the fasting, but do not understand the deeper meanings of Ramadan: "The purpose of Ramadan is to become closer

to God, and fasting is only part of the process. There are all the extra things you have to do - more prayers, more Qu'ran reading." Even if they do know what it is, they may not all understand it. "Most of them don't understand the idea of not drinking even a glass of water for so many hours, from sunrise to sunset. I believe that, if there are starving people around the world, we should be able to empathise with them

for at least part of the day. It makes us more compassionate." Shaheen confides that some people will go out of their way to avoid eating in front of her. "It embarrasses me. Fasting is part of my religion and I don't need other people to change their habits for me". Abdullah's friends joined him in the fast for a day last year, but it "was for the experience and not through solidarity".

culture, any type of food may be eaten to break the fast, but some items such as dates are widely used, because of their religious significance - it is said that Prophet Mohammed broke his fast by eating them. The iftar is an occasion for getting together family and/or friends and sharing a meal; thus, it is often very elaborate.

Since Ramadan encourages people to abstain from unhealthy activities such as smoking, it has health benefits. Some Muslims even hold that they lose weight during the month of Ramadan, due to fasting! According to Diane Desmarais, a nutritionist, this may not always be the case. "In general, people tend to eat and drink more than normal when they break their fast in the evening. This encourages weight gain." Having a healthy Ramadan period is easily possible however, according to Dr Fareed Bahadoor, who practices in the private sector. "To fast implies adopting healthy eating habits and self-imposing a discipline that must not be infringed". For instance, Shaheen, a young Muslim woman, confides

that she very much looks forward to the iftar after a day of fasting - "dates, alouda, jelly, oily food!". Abdullah, a Muslim residing in Quatre-Bornes, explains that the iftar has special significance. "Most Muslims have kept the tradition of old times where the whole family will sit together, pray just before iftaar and then break their fast with dates and water, and then comes the oily food. The whole process is to make family bonds stronger." "Iftars" are usually more joyous and euphoric than the early "sehris". There is a certain excitement in the air for those who have fasted all day long, waiting for the fast-breaking ritual which is usually accompanied by a plethora of savouries: for instance, hot and crispy gateaux piments, soft bhajaas, samosas, and all kinds of "gato salé". As drinks, "aloudas" are normally served although this may vary depending on the tastes of people.

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The five pillars of Islam

Ramadan, or the act of ritual fasting, is one of the five fundamental pillars of Sunni Islam. These pillars denote the five duties incumbent on every Muslim in order to properly adhere to the religion. They are the Shahadah (profession of faith), Salah (daily prayers), Zak't (alms-giving), Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and Sawm (fasting). Shahadah is a set statement which recognizes that Allah is the only God and that Mohammed is his prophet. In Arabic, this is "Lâ ilâha illallâh, Muhammadur rasûlullâh," a close translation of which is "There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God". The Salah comprises five prayers, which are said at different times of the day - Fajr (dawn), Zuhr (noon), Asr (afternoon), Maghrib (sunset) and Isha'a (evening). Zak't is the action of giving a small percentage of one's wealth to charity yearly. The ritual pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah, the Hajj, must be carried out by all Muslims at least once in their lifetime, if they can afford it. As for Sawm, or fasting, the compulsory fasting during the month of Ramadan is its main example, but Muslims may fast at other times and for other reasons, to atone for their sins for example.