

COVID-19 and how to support staff who may be fasting in the month of Ramadan

Fasting plays an important role in many major religions and is a central feature in all the Abrahamic faiths. In Islam, adult Muslims, who are able to, are required to fast during the month of Ramadan.

Fasting has been ordained to improve mindfulness of Allah (God) in Muslims' day-to-day lives. For this reason, Ramadan is a time of prayer and self-reflection, where Muslims are encouraged to read the Qur'an, increase in their charitable giving and in worship. These acts engender a sense of gratitude, self-discipline and restraint, which should continue throughout the year.

As Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr will occur during the projected peak of the COVID-19 outbreak, this guidance includes specific advice to address the implications of this for the NHS.

When is Ramadan?

The Islamic calendar is calculated according to the lunar cycles, so the month of Ramadan begins when the new moon is sighted. As a result, the start and finish times change from year to year, usually advancing 10 days earlier every year.

Ramadan lasts for 29-30 days and ends with the celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr. This year Ramadan is due to start on 23 or 24 April 2020, depending on the sighting of the new moon; Eid-ul-Fitr is likely to be on 23 or 24 May 2020.

What do Muslims do during Ramadan?

The basic requirement is for all Muslims to fast from dawn to sunset daily. Fasting, in Islam, is the act of complete abstinence from food, drink, smoking and intimate sexual relations during this part of the day. Bad behavior such as lying, deceiving, swearing or insulting others also detracts from the reward of the one who is fasting.

The fast is broken at sunset with a meal called iftar. Following the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), most Muslims will first drink water or eat dates and then have a normal meal.

In addition to fasting, Muslims will also spend most of their evenings in a special supererogatory prayer called taraweeh, which is usually performed in congregation at a mosque. However, with the suspension of congregational activities and closure of Mosques nationally due to the COVID-19 outbreak, these may be performed individually at home or in the workplace. The prayer can take anywhere between one to three hours.

KEY WORKPLACE CONSIDERATIONS DURING RAMADAN

The NHS has a diverse workforce. Line managers, supervisors and colleagues should be aware of key advice relating to Muslim staff that may be observing fasting during the month of Ramadan. The NHS Muslim Network and the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA) would like to share some top tips with you for supporting NHS staff and colleagues throughout the month of Ramadan.

Advice for line managers and supervisors

1. Do not make assumptions about who in your team may be observing Ramadan – Islam is a faith that welcomes people of all races and backgrounds.
2. Observing Ramadan may not be noticeable so make it easy for your team members to let you know if they are fasting.
3. If you manage a member of staff who will be observing Ramadan, ensure that you have some one-to-one time to discuss any workplace adjustments that can be considered.
4. Fasting can affect people in different ways (for example, some people may understandably become a little quieter or slightly tired at times, even though most staff have fed back that their productivity increased after the first few days).
5. Dignity and respect from managers and colleagues is helpful and expected. Be aware that fasting colleagues will not even be drinking any fluid (including water) and they may therefore feel less energetic and even less inclined to join in office conversations on occasions – don't take it personally and ensure communication can be made in other ways where possible.
6. Workplace adjustments should not impact negatively on patient care. Managers and their staff can discuss and consider options such as occasional working from home where appropriate to the role and individual circumstances, core hour working where time can be made up in lieu, and provision for paid and unpaid leave where viable. When Ramadan falls in the summer months it can be particularly challenging, as the days are longer.

7. If members of the team observing Ramadan feel comfortable doing so, encourage them to give short presentations and encourage normal discussions about Ramadan and how the team can best support them.
8. Colleagues who are fasting will not expect others, who are not observing Ramadan to do the same, so please don't feel anxious about making a cup of tea for the team or eating your lunch. However, please be sensitive by not continually offering them a piece of cake!
9. You may find that some staff request up to two weeks annual leave towards the end of Ramadan to help focus on and intensify their acts of worship. This should be treated as any other annual leave request, therefore managers using their judgment to ensure that negative impact on the team and patient care is mitigated against, but should try and accommodate as fully as possible.
10. Please ensure staff have reasonable time during the day to complete prayers and an appropriate space is allocated for this purpose. With the additional pressure on staff due to COVID-19, staff may have to vary their times for daily prayers and, hence it is important that staff are provided with a permanent place for prayer.
11. If the prayer room will be closed for cleaning or for some other reason please ensure that staff are given enough notice, and reasonable alternative facilities have been provided during the closure.

Advice for colleagues who are fasting

1. Prior to the month of Ramadan, do let your manager know you will be fasting and discuss the impact it may have on your routine or habits. They can then support you by considering reasonable workplace adjustments. They will also be able to seek your guidance on and alert you to events where iftar meals may be served.
2. Where you can, balance your workday. Try to organise your day so that rotas, meetings and conference calls happen, where possible, when you are at your most alert, ensuring that your colleague's own requirements and patient care are also considered.
3. Any annual leave requests should be discussed with your line manager well in advance and while booking, discuss how you can maintain minimal impact on patient care or team working.
4. Try to ensure that you take your usual allocated breaks throughout the day, and where possible, get some fresh air at these times.
5. Discuss with your manager how you can make provision for prayer times during the working day. With the current work pressure due to the COVID-19 outbreak, please

- be considerate in terms of how much time you request to ensure patient care is not affected adversely.
6. Drink lots of water throughout the period when you are not fasting to keep hydrated thereby avoiding headaches and tiredness.
 7. Staff who are not well (COVID-19 related or generally) or pregnant, please consider the concession provided by the religion whereby these groups are excused from fasting. Seek medical advice if you are unsure. The missed fasts can be made up at a later date in the year once you feel capable.

Eid ul Fitr

The end of Ramadan is celebrated with Eid-ul-Fitr – the festival of “fast-breaking”. On the morning of Eid, Muslims go the mosque for a special prayer. This is usually followed by visits to families and friends, exchanging gifts and socialising. If the social distancing due to COVID-19 remains enforced during Eid-ul-Fitr, staff are advised to observe those measures and Mosques will be closed for prayers.

COVID-19

Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr this year will occur during the expected peak of the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the additional pressure on the NHS, it is essential that managers consider the above guidelines for the health and wellbeing of Muslim staff in a way that doesn't negatively impact patient welfare and care. And likewise, it is advised that staff observing Ramadan have early conversations with managers to mitigate any risks to the service and to patient care.

The NHS Muslim Network and BIMA would like to commend all staff attending to patients affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. This is a great act of giving and sacrifice and the rewards in Ramadan will be multiplied manifold.

For Muslim staff who would like further guidance on COVID-19 and its impact on Muslim communities and Mosques, please see the [Muslim Council of Britain website](#) for more details. Public Health England have also produced [guidance](#) relating to burials for faith communities.

Several organisations are also offering peer support for NHS staff that want to speak to someone confidentially. To find out more or for any further guidance, please contact either the NHS Muslim Network at NHSI.MuslimNetwork@NHS.Net or BIMA at COVID@Britishima.org.