

Introduction to Dietary Laws in Islam

Description: Consuming food and drink can become a rewarding act if done in accordance to the guidelines provided in the Quran and Sunnah. In this lesson the basic rules of the Islamic dietary law have been highlighted.

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Objectives

- To understand the distinction between the permissible and prohibited foods according to the Islamic dietary laws.
- To learn the Islamic stance on vegetarianism and other diets.
- To understand the Islamic stance on alcoholism and mind altering drugs.

Arabic Terms

- Sunnah - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.
- *Halal* - permissible.
- *Haram* - Forbidden or prohibited.
- *Shirk* - a word that implies ascribing partners to Allah, or ascribing divine attributes to other than Allah, or believing that the source of power, harm and blessings comes from another besides Allah.

The Quran and *Sunnah* have provided a number of guidelines for what is allowed for Muslims to eat and what is not, and thus, Muslim dietary practice is directly related to divine obedience. Practicing Muslims obey Allah by following these guidelines, and thus they are rewarded for this, as following the guidelines of the religion is considered worship.

Permitted food and drinks are classified as *halal*, while those forbidden as *haram*. Since 'you are what you eat', Islam permits food deemed wholesome for the body and the soul and forbids what is detrimental to them, as the Quran declares:

"Today all good, pure foods have been made lawful for you." (Quran 5:5)

Mainstream Christianity claims no dietary laws to speak of, whereas Judaism has

numerous and rigorous dietary laws. In Hinduism, food is one of the principal indices of social status, as food observances help to define caste ranking. Islamic dietary laws, on the other hand, bond the community of faithful in one whole, and in their rigor they lie somewhere in between Judaism and Christianity.

In this lesson we will familiarize ourselves with basic rules of Islamic dietary law.

The Good and Permissible

Generally, every food and drink is permissible unless it is prohibited by Allah or His Messenger, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him. What is *halal* is much more than what has been made *haram*, and thus discussion is often limited to what is *haram*. All vegetables, fruits, lentils and grains are permissible, and nothing has been explicitly forbidden in the Quran in their regards.

As for meat, all seafood has been made permissible, as are common meats like beef, chicken, and lamb. There is such a large variety of foods made permissible in Islam that it would be impossible to mention them all in this article. Thus, as is customarily done, we will mention the restrictions placed upon diet by Islam.

Prohibited Foods

1. Prohibition of Carrion

Allah says in the Quran:

'Indeed, what He has forbidden to you is the flesh of dead animals...' (Quran 2:173)

The first prohibited food is the flesh of "dead animals," that is, the animal which dies of natural causes, without being slaughtered or hunted. There are many health hazards in carrion, details of which can be found [here](#).

But Allah has created other beings in such a way that they are able to benefit from carrion as a source of sustenance.. An exception to this rule is sea-food. Prophet Muhammad said of the sea:

'Its water is pure and its dead are *halal* (to eat).' (*Musnad*)

This maybe due to the preserving factor of salt coupled with the fact that it is next to impossible to catch live fish and "slaughter" them. It may be also due to the physiology of fish itself.

2. Prohibition of Flowing Blood^[1]

The second prohibition relates to flowing or liquid blood which cannot be used as food or drink. It's rare to find recipes using blood anyway!

3. Pork[2]

The third prohibited food is pork, that is, the flesh of swine. All pork products like sausage, pepperoni, salami, chops, ribs, lard, bacon, and ham are forbidden.

4. Animal Dedicated to Anyone Other Than Allah[3]

The fourth prohibition refers to animals[4] which are dedicated to anyone other than Allah, that is to say, those which are slaughtered with the invocation of a name other than the name of Allah, such as idols, celestial objects, prophets or saints. When slaughtering an animal, the Arab polytheists would invoke the names of their idols. In this case, the reason for the prohibition is entirely related to faith: to safeguard the belief in Allah, to purify worship, and to oppose *shirk* in matters of food consumption. Indeed it is Allah who created man and subjected the animals to him and permitted him to take its life for food on the condition that His name be pronounced at the time of slaughter. Pronouncing the name of Allah while slaughtering the animal is an announcement that one is taking the life of this creature by the permission of its Creator, while if one invokes any other name, he has forfeited this permission and must be denied the use of its flesh.

5. Slaughtering with means which does not properly allow the exit of Blood[5]

Allah in the Quran mentions various forms of this category:

- Strangulation: An animal which has been strangled, for example, by a rope around its neck, or suffocated is forbidden.
- Beaten to Death[6]
- A Fallen Animal[7]: An animal which dies as a result of a fall from a high place, or by falling into a gully or ravine.
- Gored[8]: An animal which dies as a result of being gored by the horns of another animal.
- Partly Eaten by Other Animals[9]: An animal partly consumed by wild beasts and dies as a result.

6. Other Animals

The Quran says concerning the Messenger of Allah:

"...(he) makes lawful to them what is good and makes unlawful what is foul..." (Quran 7:157)

In addition to the terrestrial animals prohibited by the Quran, the Prophet also forbade the eating of any carnivorous animals with canine teeth, and any bird with talons.[10]

Carnivorous animals denote those which prey on others and devour them by tearing them apart, e.g., the lion, leopard, wolf, and the like; birds with talons such as the hawk, eagle, and the falcon.

Animals Slaughtered by Jews and Christians

Islam emphasizes that animals must be slaughtered in a prescribed manner.^[11] While Islam takes an uncompromising attitude towards meat slaughtered by polytheists, it is lenient in the case of meat of Jews and Christians, for they also have been ordered to slaughter in the name of God in their revelations.^[12] Consequently, Islam permits meats slaughtered by them:

"...and the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you." (Quran 5:6)

Necessity Dictates Exceptions

"...He has explained to you what He has made haram for you, except that to which you are compelled..." (Quran 6:119)

In Islamic law, necessity is deemed to exist when one fears death or great harm. If one finds nothing else to eat except that which is prohibited, and the person fears death, he may apply this rule. One should, however, stay within the limits and eat only enough to keep him alive.

Vegetarianism and Other Diets

Many meats are *halal*, but a Muslim does not have to eat meat, it's *not* part of faith! A Muslim can be vegetarian by choice. There are many foods which a Muslim can choose to eat from, and one should not feel that they must eat things they do not desire. The Prophet himself preferred not to eat onions or garlic, nor desert-lizard, a type of meat some ate in his time. One should not think, however, that there is something ethically wrong with eating meat, or else they would in a sense be legislating ethics, which is a right of Allah alone.

Alcohol and other Mind Altering Drugs

The Arabs before Islam were fond of wine and drinking. Love of wine is reflected and seen in their language, which has nearly one hundred names for it, and in their poetry, which celebrates the praises of wine, goblets, and drinking parties.

To eradicate the evil of drinking from society, Allah prohibited it in measured stages. First, He made it clear to them that the harm of drinking wine is greater than its benefit. Next, He told them not to come close to *salah* while intoxicated; and finally, He revealed the verse that completely forbade alcohol.^[13]

The response of the Muslims when the verse of prohibition was revealed was remarkable. People were drinking, with partly-filled cups in their hands. As soon as they heard someone shouting the verse to announce its prohibition, they poured the remaining

drinks upon the ground and broke their fermentation pots.

The Prophet declared all intoxicants to be completely forbidden:

"Everything which alters the mind is [like] alcohol, and every type of alcohol is haram." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

Drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, opium, and the like are definitely included in the prohibited category of alcohol and therefore are *haram*.

Islam forbids all intoxicants, regardless of the amount consumed. This is why the Prophet said:

"Whatever intoxicates if consumed in a large amount, a small amount of it is haram." (*Abu Daud, Al-Tirmidhi*)

A final word... adjusting diet is perhaps one of the major lifestyle changes a new Muslim has to go through after entering the fold of Islam. Many before you have done it, it's an adjustment you will be able to make as well with some self-discipline and help from Allah. Lastly, it is perhaps safest to find *halal* meat stores in your area to buy meat from.

Endnotes:

[1] '...and blood...' (Quran 2:173)

[2] '...and the flesh of swine...' (Quran 2:173)

[3] '...and that which has been dedicated to other than Allah.' (Quran 2:173)

[4] And by analogy, anything edible or non-edible.

[5] 'Forbidden to you are the flesh of dead animals and blood and the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to any other than Allah, and that which has been killed by strangling...' (Quran 5:3)

[6] '...or by beating...' (Quran 5:3)

[7] '...or by falling...' (Quran 5:3)

[8] '...or by being gored...' (Quran 5:3)

[9] '...and that which has been (partly) eaten by a wild beast...' (Quran 5:3)

[10] *Saheeh Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

[11] Details of Islamic manner of slaughter is out of the scope of this lesson.

[12] "Blessed art Thou . . . who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning slaughtering." SHEḤITAH, Wilhelm Bacher, Julius H. Greenstone. The Jewish Encyclopedia. (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=582&letter=S>)

[13] Quran 5:90.

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