10 A Greasy Situation: Your Guide to Cooking Oils
J&M® halal certified meals use only wholesome ingredients and have NO MSG, NO SOY, and NO ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS OR COLORS. Each meal is fully cooked and is conveniently packaged in either 10 oz. (283 g) microwaveable serving dishes or 8 oz. (227 g) travel and camping pouches. Reheat to eat in minutes.

**LAMB & LENTIL STEW:** Tender lamb joins a medley of tomatoes, lentils, onions, chickpeas, zucchini and red and green sweet peppers. Aromatic herbs and spices invite all to taste and enjoy this truly delicious meal.

**LAMB & BARLEY STEW:** Tender lamb, combined with barley, eggplant, red and green sweet peppers, zucchini and onions, create a true culinary delight! A scrumptious meal with a variety of textures, it is deliciously seasoned with herbs and spices of the Middle East.

**MY KIND OF CHICKEN®:** A favorite combination of chunks of light and dark chicken meat with brown rice, peas and carrots in a mild sauce.

**CHICKEN MEDITERRANEAN:** A hearty chicken meal with the flavors of the Mediterranean region. It has chunks of light and dark chicken meat, tomatoes, potatoes, chickpeas, and black olives in a tangy sauce.

**CHICKEN & NOODLES:** A winning combination with chunks of light and dark chicken meat, homestyle Kluski noodles, peas and carrots in a lightly seasoned sauce.

**CHICKEN & BLACK BEANS:** A scrumptious meal with chunks of light and dark chicken meat, black & kidney beans, tomatoes, potatoes, sweet peppers and corn. Simple spicing brings out its full flavor!

**BEEF STEW:** A satisfying and delicious stew! It has chunks of lean beef, with potatoes, sweet peppers, tomatoes, cabbage, zucchini, chickpeas and carrots in a flavorful sauce.

**OLD WORLD STEW:** Chunks of lean beef, with brown rice, tomatoes, zucchini and pinto beans. The sauce is seasoned with the aromatic flavors of the Middle East.

**PASTA WITH GARDEN VEGETABLES:** This delicious and robust meal has rotini pasta with peppers, mushrooms, zucchini and tomatoes. It is perfectly flavored with traditional Italian seasonings.

**VEGETARIAN STEW:** A meal fit for vegetarian and hearty eater alike! With macaroni, vegetables, potatoes, barley, lentils, peanuts and seasonings, this meal has great taste and a variety of textures.

**CHEESE TORTELLINI:** Cheese-filled tortellini are simply delicious in a well-seasoned tomato sauce, with the added protein and texture of pinto beans.

**FLORENTINE LASAGNA:** A meal influenced by the tastes of Florence. Savor the combination of small lasagna noodles in a tomato sauce with Ricotta and Parmesan cheeses, spinach and pinto bean pieces which add texture and protein.
Contents

04 Editor’s Note
05 From the Publisher’s Desk

FOOD TRENDS
06 Specialty Diets: Fad or For Real?
10 A Greasy Situation: Your Guide to Cooking Oils

HEALTH & NUTRITION
16 Choosing Wisely: The Best Ways to Get Your Daily Dose of Carbs

QURANIC & PROPHETIC FOODS
20 Don’t Be Bored By Gourd

A CLOSER LOOK AT LABELS
22 The Enzyme Enigma

RECIPES
24 Paleo Breakfast of Champions
25 Butternut Squash, Chickpea, and Lentil Stew
26 Pumpkin Power Smoothie
27 Roasted Vegetable Risotto

FEATURES
28 Namaste or Namaste-Away? A Look at Yoga & Islam
32 At War With Food

36 Halal-Certified Product Locator
Assalamu Alaikum,

Summer is officially over. Eid ul-Adha has come and gone. The kids are back in school. When the seasons change, quite often, so too do our diets. Nothing too dramatic usually—trading in the grill for the oven, adding hearty soups to the menu, replacing light summer salads with heavier fare.

Even those adhering to specific diets are afforded the option to alter their menus seasonally. But, how varied are these specialty diets to begin with? Why follow a gluten-free diet if not medically necessary? What does it mean to be Paleo? Are these “Specialty Diets: Fad or For Real?”

A couple decades ago, a low-carb diet was all the rage. It’s still a popular choice for many, but are carbs really all bad? Find out in “Choosing Wisely: The Best Ways to Get Your Daily Dose of Carbs.”

In almost any recipe, regardless of the type of diet you follow (or don’t), some type of oil is used. These days, you’ll see a lot more than just vegetable and olive oil. Check out “A Greasy Situation: Your Guide to Cooking Oils” to learn about some oils you may not have ever tried.

Something else you may have never tried: yoga. Have you given it a go? It’s definitely a growing trend, but is it a proper Islamic activity? “Namaste or Namaste-Away?” gives you a look at yoga and Islam.

Are you a courgette connoisseur or a picky pumpkin-eater? The varieties of squash are certainly numerous—in size, shape, color, and taste. Get the scoop on this prophetic food in “Don’t Be Bored By Gourd.”

Being a halal consumer often requires some label-reading. But, do you really know what all ingredients are made of? In this issue, we take a closer look at enzymes in “The Enzyme Enigma.”

Do you have a healthy relationship with food? We all get cravings every now and then, or have times when we want to eat specific items or dishes. For most of us, wanting to end a rough day with some chocolate ice cream isn’t a big deal. But what happens if every day is a rough day? Are you “At War With Food”?

Don’t forget to give the recipes a try and let us know what you think! Send us an email or connect via Facebook or Twitter. We love to hear from our readers!

Happy Reading!

Sincerely,

Alia Shalabi content manager
Assalamu Alaikum,

The IFANCA family endured another sad day on July 8 with the news of the passing away of Br. Ali (Allen) Hamood. I have known Br. Hamood for nearly 35 years, as we met in Chicago in 1980 to create a halal awareness group. He became one of the founders of IFANCA and served on the Board until his passing from this world.

With his training in commerce and experience in the meat industry, he was intimately familiar with the practices in the commercial beef industry. He recognized the difficulty Muslims had in finding quality halal meat and wanted to do something about it through creating awareness among Muslims and those in the meat industry. We joined together with the other founders to establish IFANCA with the goal of educating halal consumers on the suitability of commercial products and ingredients. Br. Hamood’s industry experience and knowledge, combined with the food science and religious scholarship other founders had, gave the group all the elements needed for a competent organization. Besides myself and Mr. Hamood, other notable founders were, Dr. Ahmad Hussain Sakr, Mr. Mahmood Ali Baig, Rashid Ahmad Chaudary, Syed Hassan Anwar, and others.

With his knowledge of the meat processing industry, he helped devise a halal inspection and certification program, in use even today. Before working with IFANCA, Br. Hamood had established a business to produce and market halal meat products. His vision was to make halal meat products readily available to the marketplace. After several successful years in the meat business, he turned his attention to establishing a successful baking company, producing lawash bread products. Throughout his life Br. Hamood had been a trusted friend who was always available and who shared his knowledge and advice with anyone who wanted to establish a halal business. Farewell, Dear Friend. Your friendship and wisdom will never be forgotten. May you enjoy the fruits of your efforts in the highest levels of Paradise!

Sincerely,

Muhammad Munir Chaudry president

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SPECIALTY DIETS: Fad or For Real?

By Nadia Malik

www.ifanca.org
It's the ultimate throwback: Eat like a caveman. The proliferation of the Paleo diet has been seemingly overnight, but the concept of it—beyond the obvious beginning in the Stone Age—first came about in the 70s. A 2002 book by Loren Cordain codified the rules of it, but it took a decade for the idea to officially become a fad.

Websites, cookbooks, and blogs dedicated to the rules of the regimen popped up, and hardcore followers emerged. They stick to basic tenets: First man was a hunter-gatherer, thus the human body is made to consume the items he had access to: protein, fruits and vegetables, and healthy fats. There's no room for dairy products, processed items, sugar, and grains.

The idea has been met with skepticism. "I really have more of a problem with the premise of it," explains Lisa Cimperman, a dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "Cavemen had a lifespan of 30 years. Personally I don't want to go hunt mammoth."

However, those who have tried what was considered a passing trend have found it can be turned into a way of life.

When Joanna Beituni moved to the D.C. area three years ago, her new roommate kept a Paleo kitchen. She didn't want to disturb the rules of the house, so she started eating the same way to test it out.

"I've had struggles with diets and finding something that works with keeping weight off without restricting my life too much," she says. At first, the protein and vegetable-rich menu was also an effort until Beituni found the right balance. Then she felt a transformation; she lost 50 pounds in that first year and found that consuming the prescribed foods was a cinch.

"You're not really doing anything different," she continues. "You're eating real food. Everything I needed I had access to. To me it's not a fad; it's more of a lifestyle."

For Fatima Hatia, a physician from Bloomington, Illinois, the so-called rage was a godsend. After being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she began researching how she could supplement medical care. Dr. Terry Wahls did a TED Talk on the importance of nutrition with the disease, which piqued Hatia's interest.

Vandana Sheth, a Los Angeles-based dietitian nutritionist and also a spokesman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, agrees that the Paleo lifestyle has proven to be anti-inflammatory, which is a major part of multiple sclerosis.

Hatia decided to try a change in her eating habits to see if it made a difference in her symptoms. "I just had to cut out the rice and the pasta and the bread," she expands. She experimented with almond flour, coconut flour, and even bought an ice cream maker, where she churned out treats using coconut milk.

"It changed my life," she rejoices. "I felt like when I was diagnosed it was the end of the world. I love playing sports, and I thought I was going to be wheelchair-bound. Now I feel really good, high in energy."

Cimperman and Sheth contend that if any client comes to them wanting to incorporate a specialized way of eating, they certainly will work around it. Although they would recommend a basic plan that includes fruits and vegetables, lean protein, low-fat dairy, and whole grains, they agree that Paleo or gluten-free, for example, may be what keeps someone motivated enough to stick to a healthier routine.

Of course, many have no choice in cutting out gluten; those with celiac disease have to eliminate the trigger found in wheat, rye, and barley from their bodies.

"To me it's not a fad; it's more of a lifestyle."

That was Ambreen Zaki's task when her seven-year-old son and three-year-old daughter were diagnosed. At first, she kept up her previous foods for herself and her husband, but maintaining a completely contaminant-free kitchen—including separate food storage containers and cooking utensils—became too much hassle. Her children's health was also not responding, so she decided her whole family would avoid gluten.

Isabelle Othman was also diagnosed a decade ago, when options weren't nearly as palatable. Now, there are more options available in stores, but Othman initially dealt with bread alternatives that were dry and crumbly. "That is actually what pushed me to learn about gluten-free baking," she expounds. "Now, I can take nearly any gluten recipe and convert it to a gluten-free one."

Othman took that passion for testing recipes and opened her own online bakery in South Korea, where she currently
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lives. At first she wasn’t sure how the locals would react, but she’s built a strong customer base and hopes to have a storefront soon.

Zaki, who lives in Chicago, also experimented with recipes that could accommodate some South Asian cooking and found which substitutes tasted good and which ones to avoid. She also prepares all the meals for her children, including chicken nuggets from scratch with alternative breading.

“Since we’ve been doing it since last year, I’ve noticed there’s a lot more awareness in people now,” she says. Because so many products these days do tout themselves as being gluten-free to accommodate those who can’t have it, the idea has become a bit of a trend.

Aatifa Ahmed of Bloomington, Illinois, took it on because she noticed a drastic change in a friend’s daughter who everyone thought was just an introvert. When her friend’s daughter gave up the grains that irritated her system, she was no longer tired. Ahmed wanted to take advantage of that surge in energy herself.

She was strictly gluten-free for a few months and now avoids it at breakfast. “I just felt more energized and felt like I was doing more clean eating.”

Cimperman sees this movement toward Paleo and gluten-free as a resurgence of the low-carb craze from the early 2000s and points out research has shown that it’s not actually grains that cause bowel issues for those who don’t suffer from celiac—it’s specific fermentable carbohydrates. “Carbohydrates have certainly gotten a bad rap for a number of years,” she laments. “Carbs that are high in refined grains and high sugar are certainly poor choices. Carbohydrates that are sources of whole grains and fiber are beneficial.”

Sheth agrees that there’s no one-size-fits-all regimen for anyone but that consumers are leaning more toward staying away from processed items, which is always a plus.

Most who are on a specialty diet will also spend much of their time researching sources of nourishment and what they’re putting into their bodies, and that definitely is what leads many to try another specialty diet: veganism.

For Parvez Ahmed, located in the Bay Area, it was health concerns first and then a cognizance that he wanted to have a positive environmental impact with his choices. One documentary, Forks Over Knives, which explores the connection between food and chronic diseases, led him further on the path to becoming a vegan.

“I became growing increasingly concerned about pesticides, steroids, [. . .] antibiotics,” he elucidates. He also feels his choice falls within the realm of Islam. Although he concedes it’s debatable whether it was a matter of availability, the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) ate meat sparingly.

While he’s added fish and some dairy back into his life, Ahmed doesn’t see avoidance of meat products as a passing fancy, and he feels the industry around him illustrates that. There are plenty of books, online recipes, and stores that cater to those who choose not to eat living beings. “I think there’s certainly not a paucity of that anymore like there used to be.”

That also was a surprising factor for Navaal Mahdi, a Baltimore-area college student, when she decided to adopt veganism. “It’s so great because of social media,” she contends. “I’m always on Instagram, and I follow a bunch of vegan accounts.” When she finds a recipe that looks appetizing and different, she tries to make it on her own over the weekend.

...there’s no one-size-fits-all regimen...

Restaurants are also more accommodating to any needs and will often alter menu items if a customer requests it.

Because of the changes she’s seen in herself—her mood is better, she’s become more patient, she’s been able to maintain a healthy weight, which was always an issue previously—Mahdi thinks she’s found her new lifestyle.

Experts do contend that even with ethics-based decisions to avoid eggs, dairy, and meat, it’s still important to keep in mind that balance is key. It’s entirely possible to be an unhealthy vegan or to lose control on a Paleo diet.

“Even with these fads and trends, they can be done in a healthy or nutritionally complete way or can be done in a way that leaves holes,” Cimperman says. “I think the bottom line is the specific diet you choose to follow is not as important as the types of foods you choose to eat.”

NADIA MALIK holds a degree in journalism and is a former reporter for a Chicago-area newspaper. She has written for websites and publications and has also worked for several non-profit organizations.
A Greasy Situation:

Your Guide to Cooking Oils

By Sarene Alsharif, MPH

Grocery shopping has become a difficult task over the years as the number of products has increased exponentially. How do you choose the best products when there are so many different variations of the same item? Bread has a whole side of an aisle all to itself! Head over to the oil aisle and you’ll find the variety just as great. Often, too many choices can leave you confused. What is the difference between virgin and non-virgin oils? What does “cold-pressed” even mean? Which oils should be used for dressings and which can withstand heat? How do different oils affect one’s health? The answers to these questions will help you select the oil that best fits your needs.
Healthy fats can be broken into two categories:

1. Monounsaturated fats - fats that help reduce LDL, or “bad cholesterol.” Olive oil is an example of a monounsaturated fat.

2. Polyunsaturated fats - fats that reduce LDL and increase HDL (“good cholesterol”), possessing wonderful health benefits. Walnuts are rich in polyunsaturated fats.

Not-so-healthy fats are also in two categories:

1. Saturated fats - fats that increase LDL, elevating one’s risk of heart disease. Butter and cheese are rich in saturated fats.

2. Trans fats - these fats, according to Mayo Clinic, are a double whammy, increasing LDL cholesterol and decreasing HDL cholesterol. Trans fats, also known as partially hydrogenated oils, are found in highly processed foods because they increase the shelf life of products since they are less likely to spoil than other types of fats.

First, how exactly are oils produced? And how do those production methods affect the quality of the oil and our health? According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, canola, soybean, corn, and palm oil, which also happen to be the most consumed oils in the United States, are produced using a process called “refined, bleached, and deodorized,” or RBD for short. First the seeds are crushed to expose the oil, then subjected to a low-boiling solvent, usually hexane, to extract the oil. Finally, the extracted oil is deodorized by heating it to over 200 degrees Celsius (392 degrees Fahrenheit) and vacuumed to get rid of any overpowering taste or odor, making the oil more palatable to consumers. All vegetable oils in the United States are subjected to this final deodorization step except for cold-pressed oils. Due to the nature of some of the solvents used to expose the oil, like hexane (which is classified as a neurotoxin for humans), some believe the RBD process maybe unsafe; however, there are no studies to support this. Also exposing oils to high temperatures during the deodorizing process could result in the healthy fatty acid compounds and other nutrients in some oils to breakdown and lose their value according to Mayo Clinic. But not all oils are processed using the RBD method.

Cold-pressed is the second method used for oil production. Brandi Ducharme, owner of The Olive Oil Experience in Rockford, Illinois, which sells only the best quality olive oil according to Rockford locals, took it upon herself to extensively study oil production methods so she could identify the best quality oils for her store. According to Ducharme, pressed oil is produced when the fruits are harvested and then pressed with a machine to crack and squeeze the oil out of the seeds and fruits. In some cases, special attention is paid to ensure the machinery and the oil never exceed 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Keeping temperatures low during production is important to preserve the nutrients and antioxidants in the oil as well as the makeup of the healthy fat components according to Ducharme and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Ducharme explains when choosing pressed oils one should also pay attention to the notations extra virgin, virgin, and light. Extra virgin means the oil is made with the first press of the fruit. This grade of oil contains the most nutrients and flavor. Virgin oil is with the second and third squeeze, containing less nutrients and less flavor. Finally, light oil is the last squeeze of the fruits and may even be subjected to the RBD process.

So, how are different oils produced? How do they affect one’s health? And what are their best uses?

Avocado oil: Boasting superior nutritional value, avocado oil is extracted using the cold-pressed expeller method, so it is best to choose the extra-virgin avocado oil to en-
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sure maximum nutrient content, based on the recommendations of the American Oil Chemist Society. The Society also reports avocado oil has a high smoke point, making it an oil good for deep frying and cooking at high temperatures. Avocado oil is rich in monounsaturated fats, which reduce LDL cholesterol, and has polyunsaturated fatty acids, which reduce LDL and increase HDL cholesterol. Enjoy avocado oil for cooking but also as part of a dressing.

**Canola oil:** From the experts at the United States Canola Association, canola oil comes from the canola plant, which is frequently confused with the rapeseed plant. In the 1960s, the Canadian government used traditional breeding techniques and created canola by getting rid of the undesirable traits of the rapeseed plant. Canola oil is produced using the RBD method. Scientists at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health promote canola oil as an oil rich in monounsaturated fats. As a result, consuming canola oil helps reduce LDL cholesterol. Since canola oil is heated to high temperatures during production, using canola for cooking is acceptable.

**Coconut oil:** Coconut oil has been in the lime-light for the past couple of years due to its newly perceived health benefits. People have claimed it to be beneficial for everything from moisturizing to teeth whitening to preventing Alzheimer’s disease. But what does current research say? According to a 2015 paper from the University of Ajman, virgin, or unrefined, cold-pressed coconut oil is the highest quality and in its most natural state, compared to refined coconut oil which is processed via the RBD method and is tasteless and odorless. Both types of coconut oil are rich in a unique type of fat called medium chain triglycerides. Experts are still unsure how coconut oil affects one’s blood cholesterol levels, but a literature review published in the Nutrition Review Journal in 2016 states coconut oil raises LDL cholesterol more than plant oils but less than butter. Therefore, switching out butter for coconut oil may help reduce bad cholesterol levels.

Domestic Engineer Tawheeda Saqa from Rockford, Illinois, says she uses unrefined coconut oil instead of butter in most of her baking. Saqa loves using it when making brownies because the combination of the coconut fragrance, chocolate flavor, and smoothness of the brownies is mouth-watering.

**Flaxseed oil:** Flaxseeds come from the flax plant. According to the Canadian International Grains Institute, Flax Canadian 2015, flaxseed oil is harvested using the RBD method. It is rich in the essential fatty acid alphalinolenic acid, which the body converts to omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, and plays a prominent role in reducing LDL and increasing HDL cholesterol according to the University of Maryland Medical Center and the Canadian Flaxseed Council. Flaxseed oil does not handle high temperatures very well; experts at Mayo Clinic recommend saving it for salad dressing.

**Grape seed oil:** Extracted from grape seeds using the RBD method, grape seed oil, much like flaxseed oil, is rich in linoleic acid, which the body converts to omega-3 and omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids and antioxidants according to the University of Maryland Medical Center. Although these fats should have a positive effect on blood cholesterol levels—lowering LDL and increasing HDL cholesterol—so far the research is insufficient to come to that conclusion, but, according to the University of Maryland, it looks like preliminary studies are showing positive results. According to Katherine Zeratsky, R.D., L.D. from Mayo Clinic, grape seed oil is good for cooking at lower temperatures like sautéing but not good for deep frying as it will start to release smoke and the nutrients in the oils will begin to breakdown.

**Olive Oil:** Extra virgin olive oil is one of the most well known oils around the world. It is held in high regard for its health

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MUFA: Monounsaturated fatty acids, PUFA: Polyunsaturated fatty acids, Sat: Saturated fatty acids, MCS: Medium chain saturated fatty acids
benefits and has been harvested in the Mediterranean basin for centuries. Extra virgin olive oil is produced using the cold-pressed method and when purchasing the oil it is important to make sure the packing clearly states “cold-pressed” to ensure the best quality oil with the most nutrients and healthy fats, says Ducharme. Extra virgin olive oil is rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, which reduce high LDL cholesterol levels. Olive oil tolerates mild cooking temperatures, so sautéing is okay but deep frying is not a good idea. Best used “raw,” drizzle olive oil on hummus or dress a salad with it for added flavor and nutrients.

**Sesame seed oil:** Rich in antioxidants, sesame seed oil has been extracted for thousands of years using the cold-press method, where the seeds and the oil never exceed 120 degrees Fahrenheit. In more recent years, chemicals have been used to get better yields of the oil, but these chemically harvested oils are used more in cosmetic products according to the Bayero Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences from Africa. Sesame seed oil is rich in vitamin E and many other antioxidants. The Tropical Agriculture Research Lab conducted a study in 2013 comparing sesame seed oil to vitamin E oil and found sesame seed oil to be superior to the vitamin E oil in all accounts and classified sesame seed oil as “an edible oil with high potential for antioxidant activity.” Sesame seed oil can be incorporated into cooking in numerous ways. Mayo Clinic categorized it as healthy to cook with at high temperatures and for deep frying. It can also dress up salads and sautéed stir fries as well.

**Sunflower oil:** Sunflower oil is another heart-healthy oil due to its monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids. This oil also has a high smoke point, making it a good oil for cooking and deep frying. Sunflower oil is extracted using the cold-press method with the least amount of intervention possible to ensure pure, nutrient-rich oil according to the Food and Agriculture Organization.

There are numerous varieties of oil, each with their own unique flavor, nutrients, and culinary abilities. Try experimenting with different types, experiencing their tastes, aromas, and textures. Focus on the sensation of the oils and how they flavor the food. Using different oils exposes you to different nutrients and antioxidants. Who knows? You may even find a new favorite.

**SARENE ALSHARIF, MPH** is a nutritionist and public health professional accredited by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Her passion is health promotion and disease prevention through nutrition and wellness education.
Choosing Wisely:

The Best Ways to Get Your Daily Dose of Carbs

By Leen R. Jaber
In the extra-cheese, super-sized world we live in today, many of us have found it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a healthy body weight. As the obesity and diabetes epidemics began to spread throughout the United States, doctors, nutritionists, and researchers began to scramble to understand the source of these problems and the key to solving them. Slowly but surely, books on weight loss and fad diets swept the nation telling people how to lose weight quickly. However, in 2012, only 20 percent of Americans reported to be on a diet during any given week, which was down from 31 percent in 1991, according to data found by the market research firm NPD Group. Yet, according to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention, over one-third of American adults are obese. So, if the obesity rate is increasing, then why is the diet rate decreasing?

One of the greatest debates that exist around weight loss methods is about carbohydrates, or carbs. Messages telling us that carbs are bad and then that some are good have created much confusion for people wanting to get healthy and lose weight. Low-carb diets have become widely popular while few understand the nature of carbs and how our bodies process them, which has caused more people to give up on dieting and give in to cravings and overindulgence. Understanding what carbohydrates are and how to make better choices will help you understand your own body better and help you meet your fitness goals more safely.

Carbs are everywhere: grains, milks, vegetables and fruits, legumes, and all processed sugars (beet, cane, molasses, etc.) such as those found in desserts, sodas, and snack foods. Carbohydrates are essential to your body’s everyday functional needs. Blood glucose (also referred to as blood sugar) is the sugar in your bloodstream, which comes from what you eat, that gets transferred to all the cells in your body for energy and growth. When you are tired or listless, the first place your body goes for energy is your carb load. But, as been advised by the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), everything is best in moderation. Therefore, the choices you make when eating carbs is crucial.

“I hesitate to label food as good or bad. When it comes to carbs, we should think of them as either simple or complex. Or even as ‘what’s the better choice?’”

And, as Ahmad notes, even fruit juices should be avoided as much as possible.

It is important to be aware of how much sugar is in the foods you consume, especially those that are pre-packaged or canned. But how many grams of sugars should a person consume daily? “Well, it depends,” answers Ahmad. “Added sugars? Ideally avoid them altogether or limit them as much as you can. Natural sugars like those in fruits? Consume in moderation.” It’s about better choices again. Be cognizant of how you are consuming your sugars. For example, if it is a hard candy then that is considered added sugar, so you should probably avoid it. But if it is an apple, which is a whole, natural form of sugar, it is a better choice because it is unprocessed and is a source of antioxidants, vitamins, and fiber. Fruits, vegetables, and dairy are the best ways to fulfill your daily needs of carbs and sugars. When choosing to eat breads, pastas, and rice, look for the whole grain options. Whole grains will keep you fuller for a longer period of time because of the natural fiber found in them. The fiber also helps with digestive health and heart health because it controls cholesterol. Also, whole grains have been processed much less than its counterpart, so it has less sugar, in general, thereby giving you more satisfaction and health benefits for the calories you are consuming. But keep portions in mind. As Ahmad explains, “You may be choosing to have quinoa as a complex grain, but that doesn’t mean you can eat four cups of it and expect your blood glucose to be controlled.”
Perhaps not as trendy today as in the last couple decades, no- and low-carb diets are still quite popular. The idea, which is supported by science, is that if the body isn’t consuming enough carbs to fulfill its energy purposes, then it will begin to burn fat instead. Although this does work in the short-term, especially for those looking to lose a substantial amount of weight in a short period time, it is not a lifestyle that should be implemented for the long term. “The danger of breaking down fat only for long periods of time is a buildup of ketones. It is called ketosis,” explains Ahmad. “It causes headaches, nausea, bad breath, and is not an optimal metabolic state to be in. So yes, you can survive with no carbs, but you will probably be cranky all the time.”

In the long run, low-carb diets cannot be sustained. Your body needs complex carbs, and even sugars, in order to control and maintain several necessary bodily functions. Rather than focusing on carb quantity, instead pay attention to the carb quality. Weight loss will be gradual but healthy and more likely permanent, leading to more energy, better sleep cycles, and a stable mood.

LEEN R. JABER has been a published freelance journalist for over 10 years. She is currently working on publishing a volume of original poetry and short stories. Leen is also a singer, guitarist, and activist for Palestinian rights.

Knowing the difference between which carbs you should and should not be eating can be difficult. Some sources of carbs should be eaten regularly, while others should only be eaten on occasion. Here is a list to help guide you in making the right choices.

**“Good” Carbs**
- Fruits
- Vegetables (non-starchy)
- Legumes
- Beans
- Low-fat milk
- Low-fat plain yogurt
- Whole-grain breads and pastas (darker or brown is usually the better option and in the right portion sizes)
- Bran
- Granola
- Whole-grain breakfast cereals (in the correct portions)

**“Sometimes” Carbs**
- Starchy vegetables (peas, corn, unprocessed potatoes)
- 100% natural juices (no sugar added)
- Full-fat dairy
- Honey

**“Seldom” Carbs**
- White breads, rice, pasta
- Desserts (candies, ice cream, cakes, doughnuts, pastries, chocolates)
- Processed/refined snack foods (chips, processed cheese)
- High-fructose corn syrup
- Soft drinks with added sugars (juices, sodas, iced teas, syrups in coffee drinks)
- French fries
- Sugary breakfast cereals
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Although growth hormones are not used in U.S. lamb production, they are legal to use. Nutrition Source: USDA National Nutrient Database

Find the recipe, certified halal suppliers, videos on our farms, and more at www.americanlamblovers.com or call the American Lamb Board at 1-866-327-LAMB (5262).
Whether it’s cheesy squash and zucchini casserole or a heart-healthy butternut squash salad, or even a traditional pumpkin pie, squash has amazing variety and taste. Many people think of squash as a vegetable. But among botanists, it is considered a fruit because it contains the seeds of the plant. Its origins are based in Mexico and Central America and it’s been a part of the indigenous native diet for thousands of years.

Squash belongs to the gourd family and falls into two main categories: summer and winter. But the seasonal terms aren’t based on botany, merely current usage. Summer squash can be purchased all year round and winter squash is available in the late summer, fall, and winter. Because of its many varieties, it comes in numerous different shapes and colors. There is the bottle-shaped butternut squash most of us are familiar with and the turban-shaped squash that comes in bright orange or green. There is also fairytale pumpkin squash and its deep copper-colored skin. Zucchini, West Indian pumpkin, sweet potato squash, acorn squash, Japanese squash, and Hubbard are all just a handful of fruits and vegetables that belong to the gourd family. Most parts of squash are edible: the leaves, shoots, seeds, and flesh of the fruit. There is little left to throw away once you are finished adding squash to your meals. As a rule: the larger the pumpkin, the harder the skin and the less tasty the flesh.

If squash is one of your favorite foods, then you are in good company. It was also a favorite of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him [PBUH]). Narrated by Anas ibn Malik, “Allah’s Apostle [PBUH] went to (the house of) his slave tailor, and he was offered (a dish of) gourd of which he started eating. I have loved to eat gourd since I saw Allah’s Apostle [PBUH] eating it” (Bukhari). According to Amira Ayad, author of Healing Body & Soul, “No one is sure as to what kind of squash the Prophet [PBUH] ate, but nearly all varieties of squash contain vitamins E and C, potassium and fiber, alpha and beta carotenes.”

YaQutullah Ibraheem, a registered dietitian, concurs. She highly recommends eating this tasty and healthy fruit. “The high nutrient content of winter squash makes it a great addition to meals. In some varieties, the orange coloring is due to beta-carotene, which the body converts into vitamin A. It is also a good source of vitamin C. This is an important antioxidant that may help to reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases.” Ibraheem adds, “Winter squash contains many other nutrients such as potassium, niacin, and iron. One cup [one serving] has about nine grams of fiber. Fiber plays an important role in managing weight, preventing certain chronic diseases, and reducing constipation.”
There are many delicious dishes that can be created from this versatile plant. One famous dish is pumpkin pie, the heart-warming treat considered an American staple during the fall season. Zucchini, also known as courgettes, can be cooked whole or cut, stir-fried, steamed, or added to stews. Stuffed zucchini is also a Middle Eastern favorite. Pumpkin seeds are eaten as a healthy snack or are often added to salads, cakes, breads, and cereals. They are good for maintaining healthy skin and help to alleviate skin conditions like psoriasis. Because of the hard skin of some squash varieties, you can remove the insides and use the haul as a bowl to serve hot or cold dishes like pumpkin soup, stuffing, ice cream, or pudding. With a little research, this wonderful fruit (or vegetable) can provide an unending list of nutritious meals for you and your family any time of year.

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he word “enzyme” probably brings you back to your high school biology class. If you have an elephant’s memory, you likely can utter the phrase “enzymes are catalysts,” but what does that really mean? And how does that apply to you now as a halal consumer? What is the role of enzymes in the human body and the foods we eat?

What are Enzymes?

Enzymes are special proteins. They play a role in almost every function that occurs in our bodies. The human body utilizes enzymes in over 4,000 necessary biochemical reactions. About half of these reactions are related to food digestion. Not all enzymes can perform the same job. For example, macronutrients are broken down by the enzymes protease (for proteins), lipase (for fats), and amylase (for carbohydrates). Protease could not break down fats or carbohydrates and so forth.

Enzymes can be isolated and used to manipulate reactions in a laboratory. They are considered catalysts for biochemical reactions. Catalysts are agents that increase the rate of a reaction without being changed during the reaction.

Within the human body, the pancreas and intestines produce enzymes for digestion, however enzymes can also be ingested from different food sources. Some examples of foods known to aid in digestion for their enzymatic properties are pineapple (bromelain to break down protein), avocado (lipase to break down fats), and bananas (amylase to break down carbohydrates). You can also use the enzymes naturally found in foods as healthy alternatives to chemical additives. Try using pureed unripe papaya to tenderize raw meats in lieu of store bought meat tenderizers. The enzyme called papain in this fruit will break down proteins that can be difficult to chew even after cooking.

Enzymes and Food Production

Historically, enzymes were used for fermentation, the production of alcoholic beverages and teas, and cheese manufacturing. In the modern food industry, there is a wide range of applications. Dr. Saeed A. Hayek, a food scientist with the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA®), explains that in “food products,
enzymes are used to control the production process, improve quality, and increase production.” Overall, industrial enzymes hold the same properties as enzymes naturally found in raw food materials.

According to Dr. Hayek, enzymes are mainly used in producing baked goods, ingredients, and dairy products. In baking, enzymes facilitate the handling and fermentation of dough. They are also processing aids for buns, breads, cakes, biscuits, snacks, and pasta in terms of production process improvement and high product quality. For ingredient production, Dr. Hayek shares that important ingredients such as glucose and maltodextrin require the use of enzymes in the production process. To obtain glucose from cornstarch, amylase is needed to break down the long chains of glucose to single molecules. Cheese cannot be produced without the use of enzymes. These enzymes can come from plant, animal, or microbial sources.

**Are Enzymes Halal?**

The most common food that causes concern is cheese. Rennet (containing the enzyme rennin) is often used in cheese production, while the enzyme pepsin is used in more specialized cheeses. Rennet is found in the stomach of young calves. Their rennet allows them to process their mother’s milk. If a cheese was produced using rennet and the animal was not slaughtered by halal means, the final cheese product is not considered halal. Additionally, depending on the type of cheese and enzyme used, the animal source may be pig, thus not halal.

Dr. Hayek brings attention to an issue many may not have even considered. “Several other products also contain enzymes or ingredients processed using enzymes. They are found in nutritional supplements to help with digestion.” Enzymes are frequently considered a processing aid and not an ingredient so they may not be listed on the label. Digestive enzymes are often incorporated in nutritional supplements and baby formulas. It can be difficult to know which enzymes are used without contacting the manufacturer; therefore it’s best to use supplements that are halal-certified by IFANCA. Fortunately, there is a wide range of halal-certified supplements and baby formulas available.*

Halal consumers should also be aware that many types of bread are produced using enzymes. Enzymes are used to increase loaf volume, increase crust and shelf life, and adjust color. Enzymes used in breads are generally fungal based; however, some bread companies still use animal sourced enzymes in their production. A call to the company becomes necessary for the halal consumer if the product does not fall under IFANCA halal-certified breads*. Snack foods using cheese powders or whey powders also contain enzymes. Again, it is difficult to know the source of enzymes without contacting the company. Halal consumers are safest purchasing snacks containing cheese powders that are halal-certified.*

Nowadays, many companies accommodate different consumer diets, sourcing microbial enzymes to produce cheeses. However, Dr. Hayek says, consumers should be aware that the culture media used to source microbial enzymes could contain blood, beef extracts, or other doubtful ingredients. It would be extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, to find out this information. The best way to avoid this issue is to look for halal-certified cheese products*. Additionally, concerned consumers can also look for products made without the use of enzymes, which may be available at specialty or health-focused grocery stores.

**Mystery Solved**

Taking a closer look at enzymes, the halal consumer should be most concerned with animal sources used in dairy products such as cheese. Always remember to check food labels for ingredients, but also keep in mind that enzymes are sometimes used as processing aids; processing aids are not required to be listed with the ingredients. Microbial sources tend to be safer than animal, but the culture media still must be investigated for cross contamination with non-halal ingredients. You can call the manufacturer service line to inquire on the enzyme sources, check if enzymes are halal-certified, or simply look for a Crescent-M on the package. While vegetable sources of enzymes are a safe bet, IFANCA halal-certified products leave you with peace of mind by taking the doubt out. 

*See the chart for a listing of IFANCA halal-certified products.

Zaira Ahmad, MS, RD is a licensed and registered dietitian based in Dallas, Texas.
Paleo Breakfast of Champions
By: YaQutullah Ibraheem Muhammad, MS, RDN, LD

Servings: 2

INGREDIENTS
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons Organic Valley® Organic Butter
2 garlic cloves, minced
¼ cup sweet white onion, chopped
1 cup yellow squash, chopped
½ cup mushroom, sliced
pinch salt
pinch pepper
1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
1 cup fresh spinach, chopped
4 eggs, poached or cooked any style
1 avocado (optional)

DIRECTIONS
1. Heat large non-stick skillet over medium heat. Add olive oil and butter to pan.
2. Add garlic and onion; sauté for 2 minutes.
3. Add chopped squash or your favorite vegetable; cook for 2 more minutes, then add mushrooms. Cook for 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper, then add tomatoes and spinach; cook until spinach wilts.
4. Drain well before plating.
5. In another pan, prepare eggs to your liking.
6. To serve, add drained vegetable mixture to two individual plates. Top each plate with two eggs.
7. Serve with a side of avocado.
Butternut Squash, Chickpea, and Lentil Stew

By: YaQutullah Ibraheem Muhammad, MS, RDN, LD

Servings: 8–10

INGREDIENTS

- ¾ cup dried chickpeas
- 2 pounds butternut squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 4 medium carrots, peeled and largely chopped
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 cup red lentils
- 4 cups Saffron Road™ All Natural Classic Culinary Vegetable Broth
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon fresh ginger, peeled and minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon saffron
- salt to taste
- ½ teaspoon fresh ground pepper
- ¼ cup lime juice
- ½ cup chopped roasted, unsalted cashews
- ½ cup packed fresh cilantro leaves, chopped
- 1 lime, cut into 8 wedges

DIRECTIONS

1. Soak chickpeas in enough cold water to cover them by two inches for 6 hours or overnight. Or you can use one 15-ounce can of chickpeas, drained.
2. Combine the soaked chickpeas, squash, carrots, onion, lentils, broth, tomato paste, ginger, garlic, cinnamon, cumin, saffron, salt, and pepper in a 6-quart slow cooker.
3. Cover and cook on low until the chickpeas and lentils are tender to soft, about 5 to 6 hours.
4. Stir in lime juice and season with salt to taste.
5. Serve over brown rice or bulgur sprinkled with cashews and cilantro.
6. Place lime wedges on the side as garnish.
Pumpkin Power Smoothie
By: Saira Mohiuddin

Servings: 1

**INGREDIENTS**

- 2 tablespoons pumpkin puree
- ¼ cup Cabot Greek-Style Yogurt
- 1 ½ cups Organic Valley® Organic Lowfat 1% Milk
- 1 scoop Abbott EAS Complete Protein Powder Nutrition Shake Mix Vanilla (optional)
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- handful of ice

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Blend all ingredients for 30 seconds in a blender. Pour into glass and enjoy!
Roasted Vegetable Risotto
By: Saira Mohiuddin

Servings: 4–6

INGREDIENTS
2 large carrots, peeled and cubed
2 potatoes, peeled and cubed
1 bunch haricot verts, cut in half
1 medium red onion, chopped
4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
2 cloves garlic, chopped
2 sprigs rosemary
4 1/2 cups Saffron Road™ All Natural Traditional Chicken Broth
1 1/2 cups Arborio rice
1/2 cup water
2 tablespoons Organic Valley® Organic Butter
3/8 cup halal parmesan cheese
10 leaves sage, chopped
4–6 leaves sage, for garnish
sea salt and fresh cracked black pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS
1. Preheat oven to 200°F. Place carrots, potatoes, haricot verts, and red onion on a large baking pan lined with parchment paper. Drizzle with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Bake for 30 minutes or until tender. Keep warm in oven.
2. In the meantime, sauté garlic and rosemary with 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a saucepan until fragrant. Add chicken stock; cover and bring to a boil. Remove rosemary sprigs and reduce heat to low.
3. Heat the remaining olive oil in a large saucepan and add rice. Cook on medium heat, stirring for 1 minute. Add water and boil until half of it is reduced.
4. Add 1/3 of the chicken stock. Cook until stock is absorbed; repeat with remaining stock. Rice should be tender. Add butter, cheese, and chopped sage.
5. Serve topped with roasted vegetables and garnish with sage leaves.
I remember the first time my parents taught me about prayer; I was very young, perhaps around five years old at the time. In their teachings, they emphasized the intention of staying present in the moment and focusing on God only, nothing else. That seemed like a rather lofty goal for a child who had just developed her motor-visual skills well enough to tie her own shoes. But, nonetheless, I tried. I remember closing my eyes and trying desperately to quiet my thoughts and think only of my submission to God, but I found it difficult. Time went on and, like many, prayer for me had become mechanical. I was going through the physical movements and was so focused on the destination of completing my prayer rather than the spiritual journey during prayer.

As I grew older, traveling through many phases of life, I began to shift away from the obligations of prayer. Looking back now, those were the times I turned to friends, relationships, or work to ease my wounds and meet my emotional needs rather than turning to God as my ultimate source of comfort. I felt as though something was missing. I needed to feel connected but was unsure of how to do so.

When I approached my last year of graduate school, my physical therapist suggested I try a yoga class in order to lessen some physical pain, become stronger, and increase my flexibility. I joined a yoga class and felt intensely challenged. I found myself breathing through difficult poses that I did not think my body was capable of doing. I felt God’s presence as I worked on my breathing. His presence helped me feel stronger and more empowered to work through difficulty on the yoga mat. The phenomenon I was experiencing in yoga was far beyond the physicality.

After a long while, I felt connected to God’s presence in a way I had not before. I felt present in my life, minimizing the rumination from the past or worry about the future. I was finally, simply content. I no longer relied on friends, relationships, or work to “save” me during a trying time, but instead allowed them to support me, as I found true savior through connecting with God. This was the beginning of a huge paradigm shift in my spiritual journey.

Yoga was developed around the sixth and fifth centuries BCE (though that’s debatable) in India and has generally been characterized as a religious practice; therefore, people will often comment that performing yoga is not Islamic. However, if we look at the root of what yoga means in its basic terms, it is about the practice of breath work. It is important to examine the salient nature of our breath and how it can connect us with God’s presence.
Intuition is an instinctive feeling rather than a conscious reasoning. Studies indicate that intuition plays a major role in our lives, telling us when to keep going with a decision or when to back down. However, throughout our lives, we can become so clouded with thoughts, expectations, and societal norms that our intuition can be drowned out, leaving it with a quiet, indistinguishable, and unrecognizable voice. For example, when making a decision, it might be difficult to decipher whose voice is leading your path. Is it the voice of society? Is it the voice of your ego? Or is it the voice of your intuition? The voice of intuition is the energy most connected to God, and the voice that grants you more clarity along your path in life.

Children and animals have the highest intuition because they think less and feel more. As a result, as we grow into adulthood and acquire more thoughts, it becomes increasingly difficult to connect with our intuition. This disconnection leads to unsatisfactory lives and misguided decision-making, which can manifest physically through experiences of choppy breath or constricted breathing. Awareness of your breath and working to change it from “choppy and constricted” to “fluid and deep” will guide you back to your intuition. The more you are aware of your breath, the more you will be able to modify it and alter your feelings and reactions to experiences. For this reason, awareness of the breath is vital and, because of my experiences in yoga, I learned how to also increase self-awareness within the Islamic prayer.

As I felt more connected to God during yoga, I began to recognize that when I performed my prayer, my body had adapted the same breathing pattern I was practicing so diligently in my yoga classes. I quickly realized that the Islamic prayer poses and postures were a simpler form to those I was doing on a yoga mat. Hospital researchers state that performing a “simple” form of yoga five to seven times a day can increase your health significantly. I started applying body alignment, breath work, and muscle engagement into the Islamic prayer and, remarkably, prayer had a new meaning for me. It went from being a mechanical obligation to a newfound way for me to feel grounded, present, focused, and in touch with my intuition—all of which lead me to perform the true dhikr, or remembrance of God. Due to this enhanced spiritual connection, I began to engage in my Islamic prayer more often and eventually began to feel God’s presence every time I took a breath in general; therefore, allowing my Islamic practice to soak into my daily life. I was lead to yoga for physicality purposes but, unexpectedly, yoga lead me to a deeper connection with God, one I had longed for as a child from the very first day I was taught how to pray.
Similar to my story, many adults were not taught the skills or awareness to understand exactly how to stay focused during worship, creating a gap between the direction to “concentrate” and the action of actually doing so. As we mature from childhood to adulthood, staying present in the moment is more of a skillset than an innate trait; and similar to any skill, it needs to be fostered and nurtured to maintain consistency.

Gratitude for my own spiritual experience in addition to being a licensed psychotherapist lead me to embark upon an extensive research journey on the psychological benefits of yoga. It was no surprise to find that there is immense evidence-based literature detailing yoga’s alleviation of depression, anxiety, addiction, trauma, and, in the simplest form, pain. Similarly, the Islamic prayer encompasses each of these components as well. Therefore, when applying the same concepts of breath work into the Islamic prayer, one will experience the same healing nature. Also, it is important to keep in mind that one can adapt certain principles learned through yoga into their own religious framework. By way of example, according to psychology research, chanting performed in Sanskrit during yoga practice can easily be modified to reciting Quran in tajweed form (pronunciation of recitation). The therapeutic component comes from sound vibration and sound elongation, not the actual words themselves.

In my own private practice, I began treating adult individuals by combining the use of yoga elements and psychology to heal/manage their distress. To take it a step further, specifically for Muslim clients, I would teach elements of breath work, body alignment, energy points, and the psychological benefits of the poses in Islamic prayer, which lead to multiple testimonials of elevation in mood and spiritual enhancement. One client stated, “After learning a few breathing exercises, I cannot describe how different I felt during prayer. For the first time, my mind did not wander and I felt true devotion in my salat [prayer].” Another client said, “I wish I had understood basic breathing exercises as a child; it would have changed my whole relationship with prayer. I want my children to learn these points.” From a psychological perspective, the emotional benefits are endless when we tap the surface of understanding how much the Islamic prayer has to offer.

In this life, energy follows thought. As we increase our belief in the power of prayer, we will begin to feel this change as well. We use our time during Islamic prayer to connect with God in a special and sacred way. However, if
our thoughts hijack our ability to stay present, then that connection is lost. In my personal, professional, and spiritual journey, yoga helped teach me methods to connect to prayer in ways unknown to me before—and for that I am grateful. Maintaining presence in our prayer will seep into maintaining presence in our daily lives; thus, allowing us a way to feel God’s presence with each breath we take.

*DR. MASUMA RASHEED* is a psychotherapist, registered yoga teacher, and LifeForce Yoga Practitioner, which certifies her to combine yoga practice and psychology together, thus, allowing the combination of the mind and body in the therapeutic healing process.

When performing your prayers, consider your breath work and positioning. Here are a few tips to help you.

“Grounding position” will be consistent throughout the practice. As you are in the grounding position, pick a point somewhere on your prayer mat approximately two feet in front of you and remain focused on maintaining that gaze point.

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**Takbir (mountain pose, raising hands to the ears)**

Grounding Position & Breath Work:

*Inhale:* Standing; both feet are evenly distributed

*Exhale:* Four corners of the feet grounded into the earth; heavy weight placed on the heels of the feet while the toes are unclenched

*Inhale & exhale:* Squeeze your inner thigh muscles together

*Inhale & exhale:* Flex the glutes

*Inhale:* Tuck in naval to spine

*Exhale:* Flex the solar plexus

*Inhale & exhale:* Back is straight

*Inhale:* Shoulders are lifted up then exhale and pull the shoulders back as though you are trying to squeeze your shoulder blades together

*Inhale & exhale:* Soften the shoulders

*Inhale:* Neck is elongated

*Exhale:* Ground the heels of the feet so far into the ground

*Inhale:* At the same time that you are grounding your heels firmly into the ground, pull the crown of the head high up to the sky; experiencing a long stretch in your upper torso

Movement & Recitation:

*Inhale:* Raise the hands to your ears as you pronounce “Allah,” all the while sustaining the position above with an emphasis on squeezing the shoulder blades together

*Exhale:* Hands remain by your ears as you pronounce “hu akbar” on the exhale

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**Sujud (prostration)**

Position & Breath Work

*Inhale:* Grounding position

*Exhale:* Go into prostration with your forehead touching the floor

*Inhale:* Elongate your back

*Exhale:* Tuck your elbows close to your chest; grounding the inner knuckles of your hands into the earth

*Inhale:* Shoulders go up

*Exhale:* Shoulders go back and down; away from the face

Movement & Recitation

*Inhale:* Subhana Rabbi

*Exhale:* al a’laa

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**End of Prayer**

Position, Breath Work, & Recitation

*Inhale:* Elongate the neck and spine while grounding your knees into the ground

*Exhale:* Turn your head to the right; recite “Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah” while keeping the shoulders down and back while squeezing the shoulder blades together

*Inhale:* Turn head back to center; elongate the neck and spine again

*Exhale:* Turn your head to the left; recite “Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah” while keeping the shoulders down and back while squeezing the shoulder blades together
AT WAR WITH FOOD

By Tayyaba Syed
After a little over a year of what seemed to be a blissful marriage, 19-year-old Deena Khaled got a phone call that would change her life forever. Her husband, who was temporarily 6,500 miles away, told her he wanted a divorce. Yes. He gave her the news over the phone.

“His decision came out of nowhere,” recalls Khaled, who was pursuing a degree in Arabic studies at the time. “I was so young and confused, not knowing who to talk to or where to turn.”

Coming from a culture where divorce carries a major stigma for women, Khaled suppressed her emotions and resorted to the one comfort that she knew best: food.

“After I realized what had happened, the first thing I wanted to do was eat,” shares the now 41-year-old teacher. “That was my go-to reaction. I didn’t cry in front of anyone. I just laughed and ate,” she says.

This response to turn to food caused Khaled to gain over 150 pounds over a six-year period. Food became an addiction for her, as she felt she could eat away her problems.

According to Milwaukee resident and marriage and family therapist Sana Mohiuddin, food soothes the soul.

“Food and drink won’t talk back to you or criticize you,” notes Mohiuddin, who is a mother of four. “It’s easier to eat than to talk to someone about your problems. Food will make you feel good without any judgment, whereas sharing your issues with others may make you feel worse or bring about emotions you don’t want to face.”

Khaled refused to admit her emotional state, and no one in her family addressed the issue at hand. Everyone constantly kept the focus on her obesity and told her that she needed to lose weight.

“No one realized that my weight gain was a reaction to something—not the problem itself,” says Khaled. “They just thought I got over my sudden divorce without ever dealing with it. For me, it wasn’t even about enjoying food, because I was eating without thinking. I was angry and hurt, but nobody wanted to face the truth—not even me.”

Once Khaled realized that food was not the answer, she began to see things more clearly. Tipping the scales at 300 pounds, Khaled decided it was time to face her problems. After finally losing the weight, she sought counseling for the trial she had suffered 17 years prior.
“I was emotionally addicted to food,” Khaled shares. “Once I conquered that battle, then I was able to focus on my emotional health and evaluate the person I had become. Everything had been affected by me neglecting the issue as a whole: my relationships and interactions with others as well as my personality and temperament. I had a lot of healing to do.”

So why did Khaled’s body succumb to overeating? It may be that obesity associated with stress-related eating is more common in women than men. Persistent stress triggers the adrenal glands to release a hormone called cortisol, which increases an individual’s appetite as well as his/her motivation to eat.

“If you’re not managing your stress well or sleeping enough, cortisol levels tend to rise,” says Lara Zakaria, a nutritionist and pharmacist based in New York. “Cortisol also affects our cravings for sugar and alters the way our body processes sugars and stores fat causing us to gain weight. When you are stressed, you crave more sugar or fast-acting energy because you are trying to satiate that need. It’s based on our bodies’ natural way that we are set up to handle stress—a type of coping or survival mechanism,” she notes.

According to Khaled, her body was doing just that and mainly motivated to eat junk foods and foods rich in carbohydrates. Surgical oncologist Dr. Sonia Cader had similar symptoms when she was pursuing her residency and fellowship programs. She gained excessive amounts of weight due to the increase in stress she endured.

“All I wanted was sweets,” notes the 38-year-old from Vancouver, British Columbia. “I was a major sugar addict and ate a lot out of stress, boredom, or my hectic schedule. You would think as a doctor I would know better, but eating is not a mindful act. When patients began mistaking me as pregnant, I knew it was time to make a serious change. I decided to reduce the stress in my life as well as conquer my food cravings,” says Dr. Cader.

In a six-month period, Dr. Cader was able to lose 30 pounds with diet and exercise. She states that anyone can conquer their cravings and fight that mindless drive to eat whatever and whenever, it just requires discipline, structure, and accountability. Dr. Cader suggests finding a support system to help you overcome your struggle with food.

Support is important if food turns into an addiction. However, we connect with food in a completely different way than other addictions. Mohiuddin correlates it to our past.

“There are so many memories linked with food,” she says, “We associate so much to eating; family, community, and good times. Those memories bring us comfort and ease when we are troubled or stressed. The past suppresses the present, so we eat to make ourselves feel better.”

For 19-year-old Sameera Abdulkareem*, however, food had an opposite effect on her. She began to detest it and avoid it at all costs. What triggered her to stop eating? It was when her friends mocked her for putting on a little bit of belly fat.

“I was mortified,” shares Abdulkareem, who was a freshman in college and dealing with the stress of a new school and accompanying workload. “Something just triggered inside me, and I couldn’t even look at food anymore.”

Over the next 10 months, Abdulkareem ate around 1,200 calories or less a day and endured a rigorous exercise regimen. Although she managed to lose the weight, she developed other physical and emotional health issues, which she is still struggling with at this time.

“No matter how much weight I lose, it’s not enough.”

“No matter how much weight I lose, it’s not enough,” says Abdulkareem. “I’ve become a slave to these thoughts where I need to constantly have control over my weight. It gives me a sense of self-worth, since I feel like I don’t have control over anything else in my life. However, I realize that this idea of wanting to control my weight is technically taking control of me. It’s like an ugly cycle or a never-ending catch-22.”
Simple things like outings with family and friends are difficult for Abdulkareem to face since she has restricted herself from so many foods. She has developed social anxiety and finds it hard to even leave home sometimes. This is an on-going battle for Abdulkareem, and she is trying to find support.

“I know this is a problem, and I need to fix it,” admits Abdulkareem. “Our communities are still not ready to address these types of issues, but insecurities with body image are a real sickness. For me, I’m trying to accept that God has given me this body, and it can’t look or be like anyone else’s. But it’s taking me time to reach this reality. Food is a blessing for us to gain energy, and our bodies were designed to move. Slowly, I’m trying to make smarter choices on what to eat and keeping myself active, but it’s not easy to undo the damage I have already done.”

Dr. Zakaria states that there is a relatively new category similar to anorexia or bulimia called orthorexia, where a person becomes too obsessed with what he/she is eating and when to eat, and it becomes detrimental to the individual’s health.

“Food is meant to be enjoyed; it’s not meant to be a punishment,” says Dr. Zakaria. “You need to find a balance. If you are struggling with this, then seek help. Find a nutritionist, many of whom are trained in positive psychology to help people manage the emotional part tied with food.

There are also therapists who can work you through these serious issues as well, and our society needs to be more accepting of this option.”

The first thing Dr. Zakaria recommends is to recognize the stress in our lives and work to combat it. She suggests options like meditation, slow types of exercise, yoga, coloring books for adults, breathing exercises, and prayer.

“When you handle and manage your stress better, you won’t necessarily reach for sugar or caffeine to temporarily boost your energy,” says Dr. Zakaria. “The more we are present when we eat, the better our lifestyles will be. When you are in a good mood, you will make better choices, as our emotional state has a lot to do with what we eat.”

If you see yourself at war with food, do seek help from a professional right away. We are all human and finding a solid support system is a key component in our overall well-being.

*Some names have been changed to maintain privacy of the interviewees.

**TAYYABA SYED** is an award-winning author and journalist whose work has been featured on numerous publications including NPR. She recently co-authored four children’s books and lives with her husband and three children in Illinois.
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