

Introduction to dietary laws in Islaam

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

The Qur'aan 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 Allaah 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 called Halaal, while those forbidden are termed Haraam in Arabic. Since 'you are what you eat', Islaam permits food deemed wholesome for the body and the soul and forbids what is detrimental to them, as the Qur'aan declares:

[“...all pure things are lawful to you.”]¹

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. Islaamic 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 article we will familiarise ourselves with basic rules of Islaamic dietary law.

The Good and Permissible

Generally, every food and drink is permissible unless it is prohibited by Allaah or His Messenger, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*). What is Halaal is much more than what has been made Haraam, and thus discussion is often limited to what is Haraam. All vegetables, fruits, lentils and grains are permissible, and nothing has been explicitly forbidden in the Qur'aan 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 Islaam 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 Islaam.

¹ Qur'aan [4:5]

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Prohibited foods

1. Prohibition of carrion

Allaah says in the Qur'aan:

['Indeed, what He has forbidden to you is the flesh of dead animals...']²

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.

But Allaah 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. The Prophet, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*), said of the sea:

'Its water is pure and its dead are Halaal (to eat).'³

2. Prohibition of flowing blood⁴

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. Pork⁵

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 Allaah⁶

The fourth prohibition refers to animals⁷ which are dedicated to anyone other than Allaah, that is to say, those which are slaughtered with the invocation of a name other than the name of Allaah, 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 Allaah, to purify worship, and to oppose shirk in matters of food consumption. Indeed it is Allaah 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 Allaah 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.

² Qur'aan [2:173]

³ Musnad of Imaam Ahmad

⁴ '...and blood...' Qur'aan [2:173]

⁵ '...and the flesh of swine...' Qur'aan [2:173]

⁶ '...and that which has been dedicated to other than Allaah.' Qur'aan [2:173]

⁷ And by analogy, anything edible or non-edible.

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5. Slaughtering with means which does not properly allow the exit of blood⁸

Allaah in the Qur'aan 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 death⁹
- A fallen animal¹⁰: An animal which dies as a result of a fall from a high place, or by falling into a gully or ravine.
- Gored¹¹: An animal which dies as a result of being gored by the horns of another animal.
- Partly eaten by other animals¹²: An animal partly consumed by wild beasts and dies as a result.

6. Other Animals

The Qur'aan says concerning the Messenger of Allaah (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*):

[“...(he) makes lawful to them what is good and makes unlawful what is foul...”]¹³

In addition to the terrestrial animals prohibited by the Qur'aan, the Prophet, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*), also forbade the eating of any carnivorous animals with canine teeth, and any bird with talons.¹⁴ 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

Islaam emphasises that animals must be slaughtered in a prescribed manner.¹⁵ While Islaam 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.¹⁶ Consequently, Islaam permits meats slaughtered by them:

⁸ '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 Allaah, and that which has been killed by strangling...' Qur'aan [5:3]

⁹ '...or by beating...' Qur'aan [5:3]

¹⁰ '...or by falling...' Qur'aan [5:3]

¹¹ '...or by being gored...' Qur'aan [5:3]

¹² '...and that which has been (partly) eaten by a wild beast...' Qur'aan [5:3]

¹³ Qur'aan [7:157]

¹⁴ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree and Saheeh Muslim

¹⁵ Details of Islaamic manner of slaughter is out of the scope of this article.

¹⁶ "Blessed art Thou . . . who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning slaughtering. "SHEHĪṬAH, Wilhelm Bacher, Julius H. Greenstone. The Jewish Encyclopaedia. (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=582&letter=S>)

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[“...and the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you.”]¹⁷

Necessity dictates exceptions

[“...He has explained to you what He has made Haraam for you, except that to which you are compelled...”]¹⁸

In Islaamic 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 Halaal, 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, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*), 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 Allaah alone.

Alcohol and other mind altering drugs

The Arabs before Islaam 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, Allaah 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 Salaah while intoxicated; and finally, He revealed the verse that completely forbade alcohol.¹⁹

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, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*), declared all intoxicants to be completely forbidden:

¹⁷ Qur'aan [5:6]

¹⁸ Qur'aan [6:119]

¹⁹ O You who believe! Intoxicants (all kinds of alcoholic drinks), gambling, Al-Ansaab , and Al-Azlaam (arrows for seeking luck or decision) are an abomination of Shaytaan's (Satan's) handiwork. So avoid (strictly all) that (abomination) In order that you may be successful. Qur'aan [5:90]

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“Everything which alters the mind is [like] alcohol, and every type of alcohol is Haraam.”²⁰

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

Islaam forbids all intoxicants, regardless of the amount consumed. This is why the Prophet, *(May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him)*, said:

“Whatever intoxicates if consumed in a large amount, a small amount of it is Haraam.”²¹

²⁰ Saheeh Muslim

²¹ Aboo Daawood and Al-Tirmidhee