

Fasting and MS

If you've got MS (multiple sclerosis) and you're thinking of fasting for religious reasons, you might find this factsheet useful.

It could help you discuss things with your religious leader, your doctor or MS nurse, your family and friends.

We've also got information explaining MS in a number of languages.

Several religions and philosophies have times of fasting. Lots of people with MS observe these fasts when they feel well enough. But if you've got MS, there could be times when fasting is not advised.

What does my religion or philosophy say?

You know what's usually expected in your belief during a time of fasting – whether that means avoiding all food and drink, or cutting out certain things.

But if you have MS, speak to your religious leader about it. They might have specific advice about how to observe the fasting period.

Lots of people with MS are fine to fast. Some are advised not to – or to keep an eye out for symptoms and stop if they get worse. Your decision will partly depend on how your MS is at the time.

Is it safe for me to fast?

There's no simple answer that fits everyone. With your doctor or MS nurse, you might want to think about:

- How do I feel – am I well enough to fast?

- How would it be if any symptoms got worse during the fast?
- Will my fast affect any medications?

One particular fast has been studied more than others for people with MS: the month of Ramadan. For 30 days, Muslims go without food and water during daylight hours.

A group of neurologists, nutritionists and pharmacists looked at the research and shared their professional experiences. They concluded that the effect of fasting on MS is not clear, but that most people with MS could fast for Ramadan safely.

They also recommended that some people with MS should be advised not to fast for Ramadan:

- People who get severe flu-like symptoms after taking the MS drugs beta interferon or glatiramer acetate
- People who use a wheelchair most of the time
- People taking corticosteroids for a relapse

- People who are having a lot of relapses or whose symptoms are developing quickly

But even if this describes how your MS affects you, speak to your doctor or nurse. It's such an individual thing.

And remember, what they say might not apply in the same way if you're doing a different kind of fast.

Get all the information you can from your health care team and religious leader, so you can make the right decisions for you.

Partial fasting

Some religions include partial fasts – eating much less, or cutting out certain foods or drinks.

If you cut something out, don't forget to find alternatives so you get the nutrients you need.

Can I fast and take my medications?

Your religious leader can clarify what your faith says about this.

But before you stop taking any prescribed medicine, or change the routine, check things out with a health care professional. Changes could alter how they work, or even be dangerous.

And if you plan to stick to your usual medicine routine, still speak to a pharmacist, doctor or nurse about anything you should be aware of. For example, some common treatments need to be taken with food – to work properly or to protect the lining of the stomach.

You might be able to plan ahead with your health care team to might find a schedule which is safe, effective and works for you.

Will fasting make my MS worse?

Keep an eye on your symptoms while you're fasting, but changes don't necessarily mean that you're having a relapse or that your MS is progressing.

Two research studies have looked at the short-term effects of fasting for Ramadan. They both involved people with MS who were able to walk without difficulty.

The authors concluded that this kind of fast doesn't make relapses more or less likely, and it doesn't make short-term progression worse.

Some of the effects of your MS might feel worse while you're fasting, including:

- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Muscle spasms or stiffness
- Problems with memory or thinking
- Weakness
- Vision
- Balance

It's quite a list! But you might not notice all of these things – and they should gradually go back to how they usually are, once you're eating and drinking again.

If you're worried about anything before, during or after a fast, let your doctor or nurse know.

Can fasting help my MS?

Fasting for health reasons has been in the news in recent years. Early research suggests that limiting calories might have a positive impact on MS. But there have only been a few small studies and it's too soon to advise for or against fasting for MS.

Search 'fasting' on our website to find out more about this research.

Find out more

Visit our website for information on living with MS, including our booklets **Just diagnosed** and **What is MS?** in a number of languages.

If you want to read the full scientific document that we refer to in this factsheet, it's free to download at ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3994348

We're the MS Society. Our community is here for you through the highs, lows and everything in between. We understand what life's like with MS. Together, we are strong enough to stop MS.

The MS Society provides this information free of charge but if you would like to help cover the cost, which will help towards our essential work, please call **0800 100 133** or visit the fundraising section of our website to make a donation. Anything you can give will be greatly appreciated.

mssociety.org.uk

 facebook.com/MSSociety

 twitter.com/mssocietyuk

 **MS Helpline**

Freephone 0808 800 8000

(closed on weekends and bank holidays)
helpline@mssociety.org.uk

FS 09

© MS Society. April 2019

This factsheet will be reviewed within three years of publication.

Multiple Sclerosis Society
Registered charity nos 1139257/SC041990. Registered as
a limited company in England and Wales 07451571