Handy fact sheet
Ramadan and mental health medicines

When is Ramadan?
The Solar year dates of the month of Ramadan vary from year to year, as does the actual hours of fasting depending on where you are. The daily fast starts at dawn and ends at sunset. You should find out the exact dates and times for Ramadan and hours of fasting each year for where you live.

What is the problem?
Ramadan is an important religious period in the Islamic calendar that requires healthy adults to fast during daylight hours:
- A day fast means taking nothing by mouth from the hours between dawn to sunset
- However most medicines are given by mouth (taken orally) as tablets or liquids.

Medicines usually work best when the level of medicine within the body (brain and blood) is kept at steady levels. If the medicine levels get too low, the medicine may not work. If they get too high, this can make side effects worse. The body can most easily do this when medicine is taken at regular, evenly spaced times during the day.

When Ramadan occurs in summer, the long hours of daylight may interfere with you taking your medicines, especially if you take them two, three or four times a day.

What about health problems?
Ramadan fasting is required for healthy adults. Some people are exempt if fasting will affect their health in a bad way. “God desires ease for you; he does not want to put you into difficulties” (Quran 2:185).

Exemptions (omitting the fast) are made for the ill, travellers, pregnancy/breast-feeding, old age/dementia, where the fast is threatening your life, or if you are compelled to break your fast. These days must be made up later.

What rules are there for medicines and Ramadan?
You should seek advice from your local Imam, Sheikh or Muslim Chaplin along with your doctor about your decision. Even if the Imam or Chaplain agrees that a person does not need to fast, some people will still want to observe the fast. And it is these people who need to seek the opinion of health professionals.

The advice below is generally thought to be a good guide and starting point if someone is unwell enough to need regular medication but well enough to decide whether fasting is appropriate and safe for them.

But what if I want to fast?
People with mental health problems (just like people with physical problems) can become unwell if they don't or can't take medicines properly. If you are unwell enough to need regular medication but well enough to decide to fast, the advice below can be a start point to help you as there are some ways to get around the problem.

Are there mental health medicines I might not be allowed to take during daylight hours?
Usually anything that is taken by mouth (absorbed by the gut and stomach) such as tablets (chewed or swallowed) or liquids should not be taken during the hours of fasting but can be taken outside of these hours.

Which medicines are generally viewed as OK to take at any time during Ramadan?
Medicines given by other means such as:
- injections through the skin, muscles, veins or joints
- ear drops and eye drops
- patches, where the medicine is absorbed through the skin.

Can I still have blood tests?
Yes. This is allowed for people on some medicines like lithium where blood levels are needed. Fasting blood test timings may need to be rearranged if you have the suhoor (dawn) meal and take medication at that time.

Is stopping smoking a problem?
It can be. If you stop smoking this can increase the amount of some drugs such as clozapine and olanzapine in your blood. If you just smoke between sunset and dawn this probably won’t be a problem but if you stop smoking completely you must seek expert advice and may need your doses changed.

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If I am taking medicines and decide to fast what do I need to consider?

Take time and plan ahead for Ramadan. You need to review your medicines and you need to remember how important it is to keep your fluid levels up (drink plenty) and get re-hydrated outside fasting hours. Avoid too much exposure to the sun as this can dehydrate you further. Lack of hydration can also affect levels of certain medicines. Make sure you are getting enough sleep too, even if it may not be at normal times. This is important also if your medication causes you to feel sleepy and your normal sleep pattern is broken during Ramadan.

What do I need to do?

Make a list of all your medicines:
- names
- types of medicine e.g. tablet or injection
- when you normally take them.

If you list those you can continue to take as usual you will be left with a list you need to think about further. These will mostly be tablets, capsules or liquids. Medicines are usually prescribed like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Morning</th>
<th>Midday</th>
<th>Tea</th>
<th>Bedtime</th>
<th>Hours between doses</th>
<th>What to do during Ramadan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Take before dawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a day</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Take before dawn and after sunset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three times a day</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>See below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four times a day</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>See below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changing the gap between doses by, say, 2, 3 or even 4 hours probably doesn't matter too much.
- For medicines usually taken once a day (morning or night) you can take them at dawn or dusk instead. There is a study that shows that fasting while on lithium is fine if you drink enough liquid between sunset and dawn.
- For medicines you usually take twice a day, roughly 12 hours apart, taking them at dawn and dusk (with an eight hour gap instead) should also be OK.
- Very few mental health medicines absolutely must be taken three or four times a day.
- For medicines taken three times a day you may be able to move one of the daytime doses to either before dawn or after sunset. Get some specialist advice about this and which way to move the daytime dose.
- For medicines taken four times a day, get specialist advice. It may be able to take the doses twice a day.

Where can I get advice?

Talk to your local pharmacist first. They will be able to tell you if your medicine is available in a different style of tablet that can be taken less often e.g. these tablets or capsules are often called slow-release or modified release (MR) tablets. A few medicines are available as patches as well as tablets. Patches are generally thought to be OK during Ramadan and may solve your problem.

Some examples include:
- Dexamfetamine - ask if you can switch to lisdexamfetamine
- Galantamine - you could switch to the MR capsules
- Methylphenidate - this comes as 3 different once a day products (Equasym-XL, Concerta-XL, Medikinet-XL)
- Quetiapine - once a day quetiapine XL are available
- Rivastigmine - you could switch to the patches
- Sodium valproate or valproic acid - seek advice on this. It may be possible to use other preparations
- Venlafaxine - once a day venlafaxine MR or XL are available

You will need to see your doctor (usually the GP but sometimes the hospital doctor) to get these different medicines prescribed. Make sure you do this in good time before Ramadan. You could also check the NHS 'Healthy Ramadan' set of pages: www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthyramadan/Pages/healthyramadanhome.aspx

Many thanks to Ayesha Ali, Nofiu Bioshogun, Sam Illaiee, Ozma Tahir and Guy Bolton for their expert advice.

The small print: This leaflet is to help you understand about medicines during Ramadan. Go to our website for answers to many other questions e.g. driving, women’s health, how it works, doses and interactions, and about the conditions.