

Halal & Health

Halal is a word originating from Arabic, used to describe anything permissible under Islamic law, which is good and useful for the community. This includes behaviour, speech, dress, conduct, manner and dietary laws. In fact, it applies to all facets of life. Halal is thus a concept that shares universal values with other religions and groups that promotes peace, prosperity, tolerance and development in all aspects of the community. It covers all aspects of the human life irrespective of race, religion, culture or geographical boundaries and politics. This article, however, focuses on dietary laws, which refers to what a Muslim can or cannot consume, and how it relates to health issues.

Food is essential for the survival of humanity. From the day the world came into existence, religion has been guiding man as to which food is lawful (Halal) and which unlawful (Haram) is for his consumption. A guideline has been provided for all humanity which will remain valid until the day of resurrection.

Among food items that are permissible include all plants, fruits, vegetables and grains except intoxicating ones; fish and most seafood; honey; meat of animals (such as camels, cows, goats, sheep and deer) and birds (such as chicken, duck, pigeons, turkeys, ostriches) slaughtered according to Shari'ah law; milk and eggs from these Halal animals.

On the other hand, food items that we are refrained from consuming are alcoholic drinks and intoxicating drugs; pork and its by-product; meat of dead animals; most carnivorous animals, birds of prey and land animals without external ears; blood and blood by-products; meat of animals not slaughtered according to Islamic requirements; and food contaminated with any of the above products.

There is definitely a reason why certain foods are made permissible while some are prohibited. This will be discussed further in relation to how it affects our health.

Alcohol, for instance, has been discovered to cause a lot of health hazards. The mortality rates stemming from drinking alcohol is alarming. Alcohol is a nervous system depressant that can affect virtually every organ in the body, since it goes directly into the bloodstream. Excess alcohol causes cirrhosis of the liver, stomach problems, sexual impotence, heart and central nervous system damage, loss of appetite, blackouts and other diseases leading ultimately to death. It also has many side effects such as altering perceptions, dulling senses, hindering coordination and blocking memory functions. Alcohol consumption also weakens a person's ability to reproduce and drinking during pregnancy may cause many birth defects in the fetus.

Islam also forbids alcohol due to its undesirable and huge negative impact on society. As alcohol lowers one's inhibitions and impairs judgment, it may lead to unsafe behaviors and one is more likely to commit acts in which they will regret and it may also cause the breakdown of family life.

Another food that Muslims are prohibited from consuming is pork and its by-product as it is harmful to health in a great many regards. The medical science finds that there is a risk for various diseases. Pig is found to be a host for many parasites and potential diseases. No matter how clean the farms and environments on which pigs are raised, a pig is by nature not a clean living animal. It often plays in and even eats its own excrement. Due to this and its biological structure, a pig produces much higher levels of antibodies in its body and far higher levels of growth hormones compared to other animals. Pork meat also contains high levels of cholesterol and lipids. All these pose serious threats to human health. The human body will put on excessive weight and suffers physical deformations. Another harmful substance in pork is the 'trichina' worm which is known to be fatal to human. It is also important to note that a pig's biochemistry excretes only 2% of its total uric acid content and the remaining 98% remains as an integral part of the body. The toxic nature of uric acid will be discussed next.

Blood of any types is prohibited in Islam. A chemical analysis of blood has shown that it contains an abundance of uric acid, a chemical substance which can be injurious to human health. In the human body, it is excreted as a waste product, 98% of the body's uric acid is extracted from the blood by the kidneys and removed through urination. This explains why the issue of blood is central in the method of slaughter in Islam.

The Islamic way of slaughtering is as follows. The animal has to be slaughtered with a sharp knife and in a fast way so that the pain of slaughter is minimized. The slaughtering is to be done by cutting the throat, windpipe and the blood vessels in the neck causing the animal's death, but without cutting the spinal cord. The blood has to be drained completely before the head is removed. The purpose is to drain out most of the blood, which would otherwise serve as a good culture medium for micro organisms. Thus, the spinal cord must not be cut otherwise the nerve fibres to the heart would be damaged during the process causing cardiac arrest, resulting in stagnation of blood in the blood vessels. As blood is a good medium for germs, bacteria, toxins, etc, the Muslim way of slaughtering proved to be very hygienic as most of the blood which causes many diseases is eliminated. Besides, meat slaughtered in an Islamic way also remains fresh for a longer period of time and does not spoil as quickly due to the deficiency of blood in the meat. Thus, meat slaughtered according to Islamic laws provides a more hygienic meat for the consumers.

In essence, most food is considered Halal except some of the above mentioned which are forbidden because of its clear hazards to human health. Among the Halal food

available for consumption, some are specifically mentioned in the Quran for its significant health benefits.

One important food is fish which is an important source of nutrition, providing substances necessary for the human body and reduces the risk of various diseases. When consumed on a regular basis, it promotes healthy functioning of the heart and strengthens the immune system. The minerals in fish encourage growth and enable tissues to recover. Its meat helps in the formation of healthy teeth and gums, improves complexion, makes the hair healthier and contributes to the fight against bacterial infection. It also regulates the level of cholesterol in the blood, thus reduces the risk of heart attacks. In addition, it influences the functioning of mental activities, increases one's concentration and energy levels, and helps combat fatigue. The omega-3 fatty acids in fish is also an important component of the brain and eye, in the development of new-born babies, in preventing arthritis and reducing discomfort in swollen and sensitive joints, in reducing depression and preventing Alzheimer's disease. Fish, is therefore, a perfect food created for our consumption.

Another important food is honey which provides healing for mankind. Some of the benefits of honey are that it is a quick source of energy and it helps in the better functioning of the kidneys, intestines and brain. Its natural composition of sugars is the most effective means to remove fatigue and increase athletic performance. Apart from that, it helps in cleansing the blood, regulating and facilitating blood circulation. The antioxidants in honey prevent bacteria growth, heart problems and cancer. Honey is also used in healing wounds where it facilitates the healing process and prevents scarring.

Olive is another important source of good health and its oil is an important source of nutrition. It is highly recommended for coronary and arterial health. Consumption of olive oil reduces cholesterol levels, prevents heart disease and some forms of cancer, reduces risk of rheumatic arthritis, assists in bone development, nourishes and protects the skin, delays aging, contributes to child development and reduces blood pressure. It is thus obvious that the versatility of olive oil is a great contribution to good health.

The fig fruit have a higher fibre level compared to other fruits or vegetables. It is very important for the regular functioning of the digestive system and helps reduce the risk of some forms of cancer. Eating fig is an ideal way of increasing one's fibre intake.

The date is one more fruit which has many important features and known for its nutritional properties. It is an excellent choice of food for pregnant women and those who have just given birth. The date has one of the highest sugar levels of all fruits and thus it helps to energise and revitalize a mother's weakened body and to stimulate the milk hormones and increase the levels of mother's milk essential to the new-born baby. Besides, dates contain a great many vitamins and minerals and are very rich in

fibre, fat and proteins. It enables the body to protect itself against illness and infection, to renew cells and ensure fluid balance.

With all the harmful effects and health benefits of the different kinds of food discussed above, every Muslim should abide by the Islamic law and eat what is permissible and avoid what is forbidden, so as to lead a more healthy and meaningful life.