

## Islamic Dietary Habit for Preservation of Health: A Review from Islamic Literature

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**Abstract:** Aim: In this paper, attempt will be made to review Islamic dietary habit with special reference to their roles in preserving health. Finding: It was found that dietary habits and food play an important role in disease and healthy persons alike. A well-balanced and correct diet is essential for the maintenance of good health of a person. It was observed that very few people really take what can be called a correct and adequate diet. In most cases, it is faulty. This fault lies in the fact that the diet is less or more, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than the amount actually needed.

**Key words:** Dietary habit • Food • Islamic Medicine • Preservation of Health

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### INTRODUCTION

It is clear in the tradition (hadith) of the Prophet (s.a.w) that the stomach is the house of every disease [1]. The hadith can be interpreted that the preservation of health is primarily based on the condition of the stomach and its condition is based on what is consumed. If the stomach is healthy, so the body will also be healthy and vice versa [1]. Although the mentioned arguments are valid, the writer would clarify further that disease arises when the digestive process-the process of taking in nutrients through the mouth and then refining those elements in the stomach-becomes unbalanced. When we say "Diet is the main medicine," it is taken to mean that we should first use foods themselves to rebalance and rebuild the digestive process. Medically speaking, different foods and drinks have naturally different effects on the body in general and the stomach in particular. According to Islamic law, to control the health of the stomach, one should abstain from consuming those things, which are unlawful but avail of all lawful things, which his Master has permitted him to eat. In principle, Allah (s.w.t) has rendered lawful of the good things and unlawful of the harmful and impure things. Besides foods and drinks, which affect the body and stomach, man also

needs good nourishment and good dietetic habits starting from the mouth until the stomach. The Prophet (s.a.w) has elucidated this point as follows:

The stomach is like a reservoir (tank) for the body. The veins and arteries receive their supply of life-blood from this reservoir. As such, if the stomach is in good health, they will receive healthy material and if the stomach is unhealthy, they will circulate unhealthy material [1].

The *hadith*, along with other *ahadith* of similar significance, clearly indicate that the stomach is the root of bodily diseases. Ibn al-Qayyim (d.750/1350) in his *al-Tibb al-Nabawi* underlines that when the stomach is overfilled with food, it will not be able to take in water and when food and water exceed their recommended level, one may suffer from pulmonary difficulties, resulting in stress due to lungs being unable to easily deliver oxygenated blood to the left atrium of the heart [1].

**Ibn Khaldun's Views on Dietary Habits and Food As the Origin of Disease:** Ibn Khaldun, who contends that medicine is needed in settled areas and cities but not

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in deserts, also believes that the origin of disease is the food that one ingests. His view is based on the *hadith* of the Prophet: “*al-ma`dah baytu al-da`*” (the stomach is the house of every disease). Ibn Khaldun quotes many medical aphorisms as well such as, “*al-himyah ra’su al-dawa`* (diet is the main medicine) and “*wa aslu kullu al-da` al-baradah`*” (the origin of every disease is indigestion). In addition, he cites many medical aphorisms related to the origin of disease such as, “Excess of food is a misfortune” and The food of a generous man is medicine, the food of a miser is disease [1].

Ibn Khaldun interprets the word *al-himyah* in the *hadith* “*al-himyah ra’s al-dawa`*” (dieting is the main medicine) to mean that ‘dieting’ refers to ‘going hungry’ since hunger means abstinence from food. Thus, it is meant that hunger is the greatest medicine or the origin of all medicine. The statement: “*aslu al-da` al-baradah`*” (the origin of every disease is indigestion) is to be understood in the sense that ‘indigestion (*al-baradah`*)’ is the addition of new food to the food that has already filled the stomach (*idkhal al-ta`am `ala al-ta`am*) before it has been digested [1]. This implies that when the stomach is too full, it is unable to digest normally as well as take in water. When food and water exceed their recommended levels, one may suffer from pulmonary difficulties, resulting in stress due to the lungs being unable to deliver oxygenated blood to the left atrium of the heart [1].

These examples indicate that the origin of disease, according to Ibn Khaldun, is based primarily on the condition of the stomach and its condition is further based on what is consumed. If the stomach is healthy, the body will also be healthy and vice versa [1]. Disease arises when the digestive process—the process of taking in nutrients through the mouth and then refining them in the stomach—becomes unbalanced. The saying, “Diet is the main medicine,” implies that man should make use of foods themselves to rebalance and rebuild the digestive process as different foods and drinks have different effects on the body in general and the stomach in particular. According to Islamic law, to achieve a healthy stomach, one should abstain from consuming that which is unlawful but may avail of all lawful things of which God has made permissible. In principle, Allah has rendered lawful that which is good and unlawful that which is harmful and impure. Beside food and drink, which affect the body and stomach, man also requires nourishment and good dietetic habits. In this regard, Ibn Khaldun says:

God created man and preserves his life through nourishment (*anna Allah subhanahu khalaqa al-insan wa hifz hayatahu bi al-ghadha`*). He gets this through eating and he applies to it the digestive and nutritive powers, until it becomes blood for the flesh and bones and parts of the body (*yasta`miluhu bi al-`akli wayunfidhu fih al-quwa al-hadimah wa al-ghadhiyah ila an yasira damman mula`iman li ajza` al-badani min al-lahmi wa al-`azmi*). Then, the growing power takes over and it is turned into flesh and bones. (*dhumma ta`khudhuhu al-namiyah fayanqalibu lahma wa `azman*). Digestion means that the nourishment is boiled by natural heat, stage by stage, until it actually becomes a part of the body (*wama`na al-hadmi tabkhu al-ghidha` bi al-hararah al-gharizah tawran ba`da tawrin hatta yasira juz`an bi al-fi`l min al-badn*). This is to be explained as follows. The nourishment that enters the mouth and is chewed by the jaws undergoes the influence of the heat of the mouth, which boils it slightly. Thus, its composition is slightly altered. This can be observed in a bit of food that is taken and chewed well. Its composition then can be observed to be different from that of the original food [1].

In its legislation and moral injunctions, Islam stresses the importance of lawful substances and their role in providing balance to the internal and external body. Ibn al-Qayyim opined that nothing can harm such a balance more than abusing the body with excess, injurious, or unlawful substances. He concludes that the knowledge of how to preserve human health is rooted in the words of the Qur’an: “*Eat and drink, but avoid excess, for Allah does not like the intemperate.*” Interpreting the verse, Ibn al-Qayyim comments that the Qur’an commands believers, as far as the preservation of health is concerned, to observe a balance in their intake of food and drink, to take in only what is beneficial, to control the desire for excess, to balance the diet, eat and drink healthy food and take in what the body can easily digest in kind, quantity and preparation. Both deficiency of nutrients or their saturation can hinder bodily absorption and subsequently cause illness [2].

**People Whose Foods Are Simple Have less Ailments than Those That Eat in Greater Quantities:** Ibn Khaldun is of the opinion that the craft of medicine is necessary in towns and cities and observes that people whose foods are simple have less ailments than those that eat in greater

quantities. As a result, those who eat less have a smaller need for medical services. Likewise, physicians are typically not found in deserts and other sparsely populated areas. Ibn Khaldun says:

... the inhabitants of the desert, as a rule, eat little (*ahl al-badwi fama'kuluhum qalil*). Hunger prevails among them, because they have little grain. It eventually becomes a custom of theirs which is often thought to be something natural to them because it is so lasting (*al-ju` aghlab `alayhim li qillat al-hubub hatta sara lahum dhalik `Aadat warubbama yuzannu annaha jibillah li istimrariha*). Of seasonings they have few or none. Thus, they take their nourishment plain and without admixtures and its temper comes close to being agreeable to the body (*fayatanawaluna aghdhiyatahum basitah ba`iidah `amma yukhalituha wa yuqarribu mizajaha min mula`amat al-badn*). The air they breathe has little putrescence (*wa `amma ahwiyatuhum fa qalilat al-`afana li qillat al-rutubat wa al-`ufunat*). They take exercise and there is a lot of movement when they race horses, or go hunting, or search for things they need. For all these reasons, their digestion is very good. Thus, their temper is healthier and more remote from illness. As a result, their need for medicine is small. Therefore, physicians are nowhere to be found in the desert. The only reason for this is the lack of need for them, because if physicians were needed in the desert they would be there. There would then be a livelihood for them to lead them to settle there [2].

Ibn Khaldun further notes that the incidence of illness is highest among the inhabitants of sedentary areas and cities due to their lifestyle of excess. They eat a great deal and rarely restrict themselves to one particular kind of food. They lack caution in taking food and when they cook it, it is prepared with an admixture of many spices, herbs and fruits, both fresh and dry. They do not restrict themselves in this respect to one or even a few kinds. Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun provides the example of people in a city who cooked forty different kinds of vegetables and meats in a single cooked dish. This type of preparation gives the food a strange temper and often does not agree with the body. Furthermore, the air in cities becomes corrupt through a mixture of putrid vapours due to the large number of superfluities. It is the air that gives energy to the spirit and thus strengthens the influence of the natural heat upon digestion. Lastly, the inhabitants of cities lack exercise [2].

From the above, Ibn Khaldun concludes that the occurrence of illness is much greater in towns and cities and the inhabitants' need for medicine and medical care is much higher than that of desert dwellers.

**Food Has an Effect upon Body and Soul:** Food and the dietary habits of Muslims, as regulated by the *Shari'ah*, have an important effect upon their entire bodily as well as moral state [2]. With this in mind, the *Ikhwan al-Safa* (The Brethren of Purity) maintained that plants and flesh of animals that man takes as food have an effect upon both his body and his soul. In other words, the principle on which the law of prohibition is based in all matters relating to foods, is not only of their material disadvantages as being injurious to one's health but also their effect on his character [2]. Modern scholarship has furnished evidence to prove beyond any doubt that diet plays an important role for maintenance of good health. In his "*The Role of Diet in Cardiotherapy*," A.H. Farooqui asserted that diet plays an important role in diseased and healthy persons alike. A well-balanced and correct diet is absolutely essential for the maintenance of good health of a person. It is observed that very few people really take what can be called a correct and adequate diet. In most cases, it is faulty. This fault lies in the fact that the diet is either less or more, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than the amount actually needed [2].

**Do Not Use Compound Drug as Long as Simple Drug Is Useful:** The physicians of Islamic medical tradition advise that "Do not use medicine as long as dietary treatment is useful and, as far as possible, employ dietary treatment and simples." "Do not adopt complex measures where simple measures could do and as much as possible, eschew compound drugs."

Al-Kindi, in his *Fi Ma'rifat Quwwa al-Adwiyah al-Muraqqabah (Compounded Drugs)*, has attempted to distinguish between densities and qualities of simple and compound drugs. He accomplished that by using the law of geometrical progression of the Galenic doctrine of qualities and degrees. Of the simple drugs, he was able to calculate the total degrees and counted the faculties of a given drug, be it simple or compound. Although al-Kindi based his theories in this matter on Greek methodology, he possibly was of the opinion that Greek physicians only discussed and explained the faculties and qualities of simple drugs, but failed to do so with regard to compounded medications which were even more significant and difficult to calculate and appreciate [2].

*Materia Medica* of Dioscorides [2], according to Galen (130-200 C.E), is a definitive source. The Arabic translation *Materia Medica* served as the foundation of Islamic pharmacology. Like the Greeks, Islamic pharmacologists distinguished between simple drugs (*adwiyyah mufradah*) and compound drugs (*adwiyyah murakkabah*)[2]. For the preservation of health, the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w), like many other Prophets before him, always liked simple and moderate living. In the case of consumption, he always preferred to have simple food. There are many ahadith which throw light on the simple food of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). He says:

Narrated Abu Hurayrah (r.a): the Prophet (s.a.w) never criticized any food (he was invited to) but he used to eat if he liked the food and leave it if he disliked it [2].

A thing which is scarce but sufficient (to meet the necessities of life) is better than which is abundant (but makes man forget himself) and leads him astray (from right path of moderation).

After having heard all this, many Muslims ask the question like, what is simple drug? We found that the most well known classification in Islam is the distinction between simple (*mufradah*) and compound drugs (*murakkabah*). The simple drugs are those drugs which occur in their natural and simple state, while compound drugs are drugs in compound form [2]. It is important to note the full significance of simple drugs for the preservation of health. Because of this, most of Muslim physicians recommend that: "Do not touch medicines as long as dietary treatment is useful and, as far as possible, employ dietary treatment and simple drug", Do not adopt complex measures where simple measures would do and as much as possible, abstain from compound drugs [2]. For *hadith* pertaining to this practice, the Prophet has also advised against excessive use of medicine because sometimes medicine do leave behind diseases. To appreciate the significance of this Prophetic advice, it is perhaps pertinent to refer to the fact that *iatrogenic* diseases namely disease caused by medical treatment, are today ranked third among all the recognized ailments of contemporary man [2].

In view of the side effects of potent drugs, most of the Muslim physicians recommend diet as the safest and best in medical treatment if it offers the necessary help; if not, then a simple drug may be used [2]. They only allow the use of compound drugs as a last resort and when the two previous treatments are deemed insufficient and fail to give adequate relief. This principle of diet

treatment which Arab physicians initiated a millennium ago still deserve to be appreciated. It is through such methodology, Abu Bakr al-Razi (d. 313/925) in his medical work, *Manafi' al-Aghdhiyah* explained in detail the important foods which nourish the body and are considered as the main factors for good health and for curing of the sick. But at the same time, if abused they can be harmful. In other words, food and diet are very essential for maintenance of health, protection from illness and healing of diseases. He introduced many types of food including fruits, vegetables, breads, waters, dairy products, spices, meats and fishes, for medical use together with details of their classifications, methods of preparation, physical properties and therapeutic modes of action [2].

Ibn al-Qayyim introduced the effect of diet, on both health and illness, is generally more powerful than that of drugs. He is of the opinion that the physical illness, which is generally the result of excess of a substance whose saturation harms the natural functions and balance of one's body and this is the type of common illness that befall the majority of people. Such illness is usually caused by: a) excess eating; b) taking in food before complete digestion of a previous meal; c) eating food that is deficient in nutrients; d) eating food which is slow to digest; e) or mixing opposing types of food or eating elaborately prepared dishes during the same meal [2].

Following Ibn al-Qayyim's idea Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti who wrote a large number of books on various branches of Islamic learning such as *Tafsir* (commentary on Holy *Qur'an*), *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *ahadith* (traditions of the prophet), Linguistics, Medicine, etc. Among his medical works is *al-Minhaj al-Sawi wa al-Minhal al-Rawi fi al-Tibb* which is considered as a very important compilation. In this treatise, he collected from various sources the traditions concerning medicine. In relation to the principles of hygiene and food, he mentioned the tradition of the Holy prophet who said: "Do observe fast, you will always remain healthy." "Do not go to bed without taking night meal." "Drink slowly and with pauses."<sup>1</sup> Another rule formulated by Maimonides (d. 600/1204) and other physicians that: one should not introduce one meal after another, nor eat except after true hunger, when the stomach is empty, the saliva is drawn into mouth and the hunger is justified. Similarly, one should not drink anything with meal, or after it, as long as the food is in the stomach, except pure cold water [3].

**Balancing of Diet Is a Primary Aim of Preservation of Health:**

Narrated by 'Abdullah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib (r.a) who said: "I saw God's Messenger (s.a.w) eating fresh dates with cucumber [3]. They, in order to explain the benefits of eating fresh dates with cucumbers, say it is essential to maintain good health by controlling one's diet and balancing one's intake of food and fruits. Creating equilibrium of food will dispel any harm they may contain and optimize their benefits. Fresh ripe dates are hot and cucumbers are cold. Each one of them will compensate for the other, balance the body's natural defenses and smooth the digestive process. This is in essence the basis of the natural law of opposites and this is the basis of medical treatment, the foundation of preserving a healthy and strong body and moreover, it is the core of medical science [3].

Since the prevention of diseases is closely connected with the quantity of food, Maimonides (600/1204) advises that each meal should be limited to one dish, so that one does not overeat and the appetite will subside before occurs [3]. According to this rule, immoderation may be in the taking of diet, when one overloads his stomach with food. Consequently, any lawful food is injurious to health if it exceeds the quantity required. The rule of moderation in eating is as follows:

O ye who believe! forbid not (yourselves) the good things which Allah hath made lawful for you and transgress not. Surely, Allah loveth not the transgressors [3].

**Stop Eating While There Is Little Appetite:** The Prophet (s.a.w) recommended that one should stop eating while there is little extra room or appetite to have more for the stomach in order that food will digested easily and comfortably. The Prophet (s.a.w) said: If you must eat more, be sure that only one third of your stomach is filled with food, one third is left for water and the remaining one third for air [3]. To prove the importance of the above instructional-relationship, we would like to relate a story, which illustrates the health conditions at the time of the Prophet (s.a.w).

One of the kings of Persia sent to the Muhammad, a learned physician. The physician remained in Arabia for one or two years but no one approached him or sought his treatment. At last he presented himself before the Prophet and complained: "I have been sent to treat your companions but during all this time, no one has asked me to carry out my duties in any respect

whatsoever. The Prophet replied to him: "It is the custom of these people not to eat until hunger overcomes them and to ceases eating while there still remains a desire for food." The physician answered: This is the reason for their perfect health [3].

**CONCLUSION**

It was found that dietary habits and food play an important role in disease and healthy persons alike. A well-balanced and correct diet is essential for the maintenance of good health of a person. It is observed that very few people really take what can be called a correct and adequate diet. In most cases, it is faulty. This fault lies in the fact that the diet is less or more, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than the amount actually needed.

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12. Ibn Khaldun and Muqaddimah, 0000, pp: 462.
13. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 326-7. Ibn Khaldun advises the physician that he should ascertain the medicine existing for each illness. He deduces the effectiveness of medicines from their composition and powers. He deduces the stage of an illness from signs indicating whether the illness is ripe and will accept the medicine or not. These signs show themselves in the colour (of the patient), the excretions, and the pulse. The physicians in this imitate the power of nature, which is the controlling element in both health and illness. They imitate nature and help it a little, as the nature of the matter (underlying the illness), the season of the year, and the age of patient may require in each particular case.
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21. To know the example of al-Adwiyyah wa al-Aghdhiyyah al-Mufradah as mentioned by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w), see Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zad al-Ma'ad*, 4: 283-415; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Da' wa al-Dawa'*, ed. Muhammad Muhyiddin 'Abdul Hamid (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 1990).
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  24. It should be noted that the preference of diet over drugs in medical treatment was emphasized by many Arab physicians. Al-Majusi (d. 384/994), Ibn al-Jazzar (d. 399/1009), Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi (d. 404/1013) and many other eminent physicians in Islam propagated the same concept. This concept, however, did not prevent them from using compound drugs extensively.
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  33. Al-Baghdadi, *T.K.S.*, 14; Tifashi, *al-Shifa*, 70; Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Muntaqa*, 2: hadith no 1251.
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