



‘Break Your Fast with Something Sweet’: Between Tradition and Medical Review

Fatichatus Sa’diyah¹

¹ Darussalam College of Ushuluddin Bangkalan, Indonesia
Faticha.sadiyah@gmail.com

Abstract. This article discusses the tradition of breaking the fast with sweet foods or drinks in the context of cultural and medical review, focusing on the relevance of the recommendation “break your fast with something sweet” in Muslim practice, particularly in Indonesia. Through a descriptive qualitative approach and interdisciplinary analysis, the author explores the origins and meaning of the slogan and its impact on people’s diets. Research shows that sweet foods, such as dates, serve to restore energy lost during fasting due to their natural sugar content quickly absorbed by the body. However, excessive sugar consumption also risks causing spikes in blood sugar levels and other potential health problems. Therefore, this article recommends a balanced approach to choosing sweets during *iftar*, considering natural sugar sources and portion sizes to maintain good health during Ramadan. With a deeper understanding of the health impacts of this tradition, it is hoped that people can be wiser in their *iftar* practices.

Keywords: Lifestyle, Hadith, Medical.

1 Introduction

The tradition of breaking the fast with sweet foods or drinks, such as dates, compote, or other sweet drinks, is deeply rooted in Muslim society, especially in Indonesia. Many people believe that the recommendation to “break your fast with something sweet” comes directly from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, who said:

“When one of you breaks his fast, let him break his fast with dates. If he cannot find them, then break the fast with water, for water purifies.” (HR. Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi).

This hadith is the main reason why Muslims tend to choose sweet foods, especially dates, when it is time to break the fast. However, over the years, the meaning of “sweet” has diversified—from dates, compote, ice syrup, to modern desserts.

When fasting, the body is deprived of food and drink for several hours. During this time, blood sugar levels can drop.[1] When breaking the fast, it is important to quickly replenish lost energy. Sugary foods or drinks such as dates or juice can be quickly absorbed by the body and help raise blood sugar levels quickly.[2]

In addition, sweet foods can also provide a faster sense of satiety.[3] When eating sweets, body will feel satisfied, and this can make the eater feel better after a long day

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of fasting. Breaking the fast with something sweet can help the body to function normally again after fasting.[4]

Based on this background, several questions arise about what is the medical basis behind the recommendation to break the fast with a sweet? Is the consumption of sugar when breaking the fast really beneficial or even risky? Thus, in this article, the author review the relevance of medicine to the recommendation of breaking the fast with sweets as well as the benefits of consuming sugar when breaking the fast.

This article aims to explain how eating sweets during *iftar* can affect the body. With this understanding, it is hoped that people, especially the Muslim community, can be wiser in choosing food when breaking their fast and not just following tradition without considering the impact on their health. They need to recognize the importance of a good diet during the fasting month to stay healthy and energetic.

2 Method

This type of research is descriptive qualitative with a literature review approach [5] which combines an analysis of cultural traditions and a medical review. This study aims to describe the tradition of breaking the fast with sweets from a cultural and health perspective. The approach used by the author in this article is an interdisciplinary approach, combining cultural anthropology (to analyze traditions) and health/ medical approaches (to review the impact of consuming sweet foods when breaking the fast).

In analyzing this research, the author uses thematic analysis[6] by identifying patterns related to the tradition of ‘breaking the fast with something sweet’ and medical findings. The author also uses Comparative Analysis by comparing the tradition and the medical review to compare two main perspectives: the religious tradition (specifically the recommendation to break the fast with sweets in Islam) and the medical/health review of the practice. On the tradition aspect, this article discusses the recommendation to break the fast with sweets, especially dates, which comes from the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad. This tradition is based on the hadith that recommends breaking the fast with dates or water, with an explanation of the wisdom behind it, such as the ease of absorption of sugar and energy by the body after fasting. From a medical perspective, the article examines the benefits and risks of breaking the fast with sweets. Physiologically, sweet foods do quickly restore blood sugar levels that drop during fasting, so that the body is re-energized. However, excessive sugar consumption (especially from added sugars or simple carbohydrates) can lead to blood sugar spikes, weight gain and the risk of metabolic diseases.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 The Origin and Meaning of the Slogan “Break the Fast with Something Sweet”

The slogan “Break your fast with something sweet” has become part of the culture of Muslims, especially in Indonesia, during Ramadan. However, many people mistakenly

consider this phrase to be a religious recommendation or even a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, this phrase does not originate from religious teachings or hadith, but from the world of modern advertising in Indonesia.

The slogan was firstly introduced as the tagline of an advertisement for a packaged tea product, Tehbotol Sosro, during Ramadan in 2005. The ad jingle featured lyrics inviting people to break their fast with a sweet drink, and since then, the slogan has stuck firmly in the public's memory.[7] The repetition of the ad every Ramadan made the tagline more popular and eventually became part of the Ramadan tradition in Indonesia.

Over time, this slogan has shifted in meaning among the public. Many think that "break the fast with something sweet" is a religious recommendation, even though there is no hadith or Qur'anic verse that specifically mentions the recommendation to break the fast with sweet food or drinks. In Islamic tradition, the Prophet SAW recommended breaking the fast with dates or water, not just any sweet food. However, Indonesians often interpret this slogan broadly, so that any kind of sweet food or drink is made the first choice to take when breaking the fast. This is also driven by the custom and culture of breaking the fast together, where sweets are considered a symbol of happiness and energy recovery after a day of fasting.

This slogan is strongly suspected to be inspired by the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, who recommended breaking the fast with dates:

وَعَنْ سَلْمَانَ بْنِ عَامِرٍ الضَّبِّيِّ - رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ - عَنِ النَّبِيِّ - صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ - قَالَ: - إِذَا أَفْطَرَ أَحَدُكُمْ فَلْيَفِطِرْ عَلَى تَمْرٍ، فَإِنْ لَمْ يَجِدْ فَلْيَفِطِرْ عَلَى مَاءٍ، فَإِنَّهُ طَهُورٌ [8].

It was narrated by Salman bin `Amir al-Dubbi ra, that the Prophet Muhammad said: If one of you breaks his fast, he should break it with dates. If dates are not found, then he ought to break his fast with water, for water purifies.

The hadith was declared *hasan sahih* by hadith scholars such as Ibn Khuzaimah, Ibn Hibban, and Al Hakim.

The Prophet (pbuh) modeled breaking the fast with *ruthab* (wet dates). If there are none, then with *tamr* (dried dates). If that is also not available, then with plain water.[9] This is the sequence of the virtues of eating dates when breaking the fast.

Imam al-Nawawi in *al-Minhaj Syarh Sahih Muslim* explains that the choice of dates as an appetizer for breaking the fast contains deep wisdom. Dates, especially fresh (*ruthab*) or dried (*tamr*) ones, have a balanced composition of natural sugars, so they are able to restore the body's energy gradually without shocking the digestive system after a day of fasting.[10]

In *Tuhfat al-Ahwadhi*, al-Mubarakfuri explains that this hadith contains several important lessons. *First*, dates (especially *ruthab* or *tamr*) are chosen because of their suitability for the body's condition after fasting. Dates contain natural sugars that are easily absorbed and rich in fiber, so they quickly restore energy without causing a drastic spike in blood sugar. *Second*, the Prophet taught simplicity in breaking the fast, away from excess.[11] Meanwhile, Ibn Hajar in Fath al-Bari emphasizes the *sunnah* aspect and the continuity of the Prophet's tradition. He states that although breaking the fast with dates is not an obligation, following this *sunnah* is blessed because it emulates the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, the choice of water as an alternative shows the flexibility of Islamic law, which makes it easier for people to worship.[12] In *'Aun al-*

Ma’bud Syarh Sunan Abi Dawud, al-’Azim Abadi emphasizes the aspect of the purity of the water mentioned in this hadith. The word *tahur* used by the Prophet does not only mean physical (pure water), but also contains a spiritual meaning - as a purifier of the soul after a day of fasting from things that break the fast and from futile actions. Water was chosen as an alternative because of its purity and ease of availability, demonstrating the principle of convenience in Islamic law.[13]

Imam Ibn al-Qayyim in *Zad al-Ma’ad* adds that dates have the property of balanced heat, making them suitable for restoring warmth to the body after a day of hunger and thirst. He also explains that the water referred to as *tahur* (pure and purifying) in this hadith not only cleanses the physical body, but also cleanses the heart and mind after a day of fasting.[14]

From a medical perspective, Ibn Sina in *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* (although not a book of hadith commentaries, but a classic medical reference) mentions that dates have “warm” and “moist” properties that suit the body’s needs after losing energy all day. Meanwhile, pure water helps the body’s natural detoxification process after fasting[15] In the hadith, it is mentioned that dates are blessed. This blessing can be understood as a wide range of benefits, both spiritually (following the Prophet’s sunnah) and physically (health benefits). Scholars emphasize that breaking the fast with dates is not obligatory, but highly recommended (*sunnah muakkadah*). If dates are not available, breaking the fast with water is still following the sunnah.[9]

Meanwhile, al-Qari in *Mirqat al-Mafatih Syarh Mishkat al-Masabih* provides an interesting explanation of the social context of this hadith. At the time of the Prophet, dates were the staple food of the people of Medina which were easily available and of high nutritional value. However, when dates were not available, the Prophet did not order his people to go to the trouble of searching for them, but to simply use water - the most basic and easily available thing. This shows the flexibility of Islamic law in combining the perfection of guidance (*al-huda*) and convenience (*al-yusr*).³

Imam al-Suyuti in *al-Jami’ al-Saghir* adds that this hadith also contains a lesson about the importance of starting with something good and *halal*. Breaking the fast with dates or water - two things that are clearly halal and good - symbolizes that a Muslim should start his activities after fasting with something good, just as he has filled his days with obedience.[16]

In addition to the Prophetic traditions, the Qur’an also mentions the specialty of dates, such as in Surah Maryam verse 25, which emphasizes dates as a special and beneficial fruit:

وَهَرَيَ إِلَيْكَ بَجْدَعِ النُّخْلَةِ تَسْقُطُ عَلَيْكَ رَطْبًا حَبِيبًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Rock the base of the date palm toward you, and it will drop ripe dates on you.

Hadiths that mention the virtue of breaking the fast with dates (a naturally sweet food) may be the basis for this slogan. Dates are high in glucose, which quickly restores energy after fasting. Glucose is a natural sugar that is easily and quickly absorbed by the body.

In the past, sugar and sweets were considered a special treat and a symbol of happiness when breaking the fast.[17] This is because sweets like dates or compote have

more value than just satisfying hunger; they symbolize joy, blessings, and gratitude after a long day of fasting.

Thus, some points related to the tradition of eating sweets in breaking the fast include:

1. Symbol of Happiness and Joy. Sweets are a sign that *iftar* is a time of anticipation and joy. In Islamic tradition, breaking the fast with dates or other sweets marks the end of the fast and the start of the body's natural energy recovery. This makes sweets a symbol of happiness and pleasure after enduring hunger and thirst.
2. Historical and Cultural Value. In Indonesia, sweet dishes such as *kolak* made from bananas, sweet potatoes, coconut milk and brown sugar have been a tradition for generations. *Kolak* itself has a deep philosophical meaning, such as a reminder to forsake sins, ask for forgiveness, and live a new and better life. This sweet food is not just about taste, but also a spiritual and social symbol that strengthens togetherness in the month of Ramadan.[18]
3. Role in Tradition and Da'wah. In some regions, sweet foods such as *kolak* were also used as a medium for da'wah by *Wali Songo* in Indonesia who combined local culture with Islamic teachings. By presenting sweet dishes that are easily accepted by the community, religious messages can be conveyed subtly and effectively[18]
4. Religious value. Breaking the fast with dates is considered a form of *itiba'* (following the teachings of Islam) as well as reviving the tradition of the Prophet.
5. Health meaning. People believe that sweets can quickly restore energy after a long day of fasting.
6. Social Meaning. Breaking the fast with sweets is a moment of friendship and togetherness, where families or communities gather to enjoy sweet dishes together.[19]

3.2 Body's Response to Sugar Consumption at *Iftar*

During fasting for more than 12 hours, the human body undergoes a complex series of physiological adaptations to maintain energy homeostasis. Blood glucose levels gradually decrease to the range of 3.8-4.4 mmol/L (68-79 mg/dL), a condition that in clinical literature is categorized as mild hypoglycemia.[20] This decrease triggers a cascade hormonal response in which the pancreas reduces insulin secretion while increasing glucagon production. Glucagon then acts as the primary molecular signal that activates the phosphorylase enzyme in the liver, initiating the process of glycogenolysis - the breakdown of liver glycogen into glucose units for release into the blood circulation.[21]

When liver glycogen reserves begin to deplete after 12-16 hours of fasting, the body turns to alternative mechanisms through lipolysis. Adipocyte tissue breaks down triglycerides into free fatty acids and glycerol, while the liver converts fatty acids into ketone bodies through the process of ketogenesis.⁴ This metabolic transition is explained in the theory of "metabolic switch" where the body switches from burning glucose to ketones as the main source of energy, especially for the brain and nervous tissue.⁵ This adaptive process was noted in a study on Asian populations by Farooq et al.[22] who found that after 12 hours of fasting, β -hydroxybutyrate (a major ketone body) levels increased significantly to 0.4-0.6 mmol/L.

In the context of Indonesian culture, Sulistyowati's research[23] notes that these physiological mechanisms often lead to symptoms such as weakness, dizziness, or decreased concentration - symptoms that are locally referred to as "*lemes puasa*". Interestingly, this ethnomedical study by Hidayat⁶ revealed that the traditional people of the archipelago have developed various cultural strategies to overcome this condition, including the habit of eating sweet foods when breaking the fast, which has a biomedical basis.

People's habit of eating sweet foods when breaking their fast triggers a complex physiological response in the body. When simple sugars from foods such as compote, dates or sugary drinks enter the bloodstream, there is a significant increase in blood glucose levels in a short period of time. This spike in blood glucose is a signal for pancreatic beta cells to release large amounts of insulin, a mechanism explained in detail in Ganong's Review of Medical Physiology.[24] Insulin works by opening GLUT4 channels on the cell membrane, allowing glucose to enter the body's cells to be used for energy or stored as glycogen.

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However, an exaggerated insulin response to a high intake of simple sugars can lead to undesirable pendulum effects. In the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, Ludwig et al.[25] describes the phenomenon of reactive hypoglycemia that occurs when excessive insulin causes a drastic drop in blood sugar levels below normal levels a few hours after the consumption of sugary foods. This condition is clinically known as reactive hypoglycemia or postprandial hypoglycemia, with blood glucose levels often falling below 70 mg/dL (3.9 mmol/L). The physiological effects of these extreme blood sugar fluctuations can be felt as uncomfortable symptoms. Research by Suratno et al.[26] reported that 65% of respondents in Jakarta experienced complaints such as weakness, dizziness and drowsiness after consuming high-sugar foods when breaking their fast. These symptoms arise because the brain, which relies heavily on a steady supply of glucose, experiences a sudden shortage of energy substrates. In addition, i research by Jones et al[27] suggests that the rapid up-and-down cycle of blood sugar may also stimulate the hunger center in the hypothalamus, explaining why many people feel hungry again quickly despite having just eaten a large meal.

Jenkins et al detailed several points in sugar consumption when breaking the fast. He mentioned that:[28]

1. Simple sugars such as sucrose can raise blood glucose levels 50% faster than complex carbohydrates.
2. Dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) have a glycemic index that varies between 35-55 depending on the variety, with a glucose content of 44-88% of the total sugar.
3. Soluble fiber (2-4% in dates) slows sugar absorption by 30-40%.

A longitudinal study by Malik et al. in “Diabetes Care” involving 310,819 participants found:[29]

1. Consumption of 1-2 servings of sugary drinks per day increases the risk of type 2 diabetes by 26%.
2. Excess fructose intake correlated with a 32% increase in blood triglycerides.
3. Insulin resistance occurs 3 times faster in high sugar consumers.

This mechanism is the basis for nutritionists' recommendations to choose complex carbohydrate sources when breaking the fast. As explained in the book *Present Knowledge in Nutrition*,[30] complex carbohydrates with a low glycemic index such as sweet potatoes or brown rice can provide a more gradual release of glucose, avoiding extreme blood sugar fluctuations and providing a longer feeling of fullness.

In addition to the type of food, the portion anyone eats when breaking the fast also affects blood sugar response. Eating a large amount at once, especially foods high in simple carbohydrates and sugar, exacerbates blood sugar spikes. Conversely, eating foods with a low glycemic index and rich in fiber can help stabilize blood sugar. One

study, led by Dr. Bell, found that consuming >50g of carbohydrates at once increased the 2-hour blood glucose response by 72% compared to smaller portions.[28] Hassanain recommends portion control (50% during iftar, 30% at night, 20% at suhoor) and consumption of 10-15g of fiber/ day.[31]

Indonesians love to eat sweet foods when breaking their fast, such as iced tea. Iced tea contains complex components with multiple health benefits. Naturally, tea contains polyphenol compounds such as epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) and catechins, which have strong antioxidant activity, proven to neutralize free radicals and potentially prevent chronic disease. However, in practice, the composition of iced tea is often modified with significant amounts of added sugar. Research data show that the sugar content in packaged iced tea can reach 20-50 gram per serving. Equivalent to 5-12 teaspoons, which is clinically correlated with an increased.

Research by Malik et al.[29] shows that consumption of sweetened beverages such as packaged iced tea containing added sugar can cause a sudden spike in blood glucose levels. This condition is of particular concern during breaking the fast, as the body is in a hypoglycemic state after going without food for over a dozen hours. A drastic spike in blood glucose levels can place an excessive burden on the pancreas to produce insulin, and if this occurs repeatedly, it can increase the risk of insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. In terms of temperature, the consumption of cold drinks during iftar also needs to be considered. A study by Sun et al.[32] in the *Journal of Gastroenterology* shows that iced drinks can slow down the digestive process by causing temporary vasoconstriction in the digestive tract. This may not be ideal during iftar, when the body needs optimal nutrient absorption after a long period of fasting.

However, if consumed in the right form—that is, tea without sugar or with natural sweeteners such as honey in limited amounts, and not too cold—iced tea can be a healthier choice. Recent research by Yang et al.[33] emphasizes that the benefits of tea polyphenols can still be obtained as long as there is no excessive addition of sugar, which can neutralize their positive effects.

In addition, after breaking the fast, if not followed by light physical activity, the glucose that enters the body is not immediately used as energy, so blood sugar levels remain high for longer. Physical activity helps optimize the use of glucose as energy and keeps blood sugar stable.

Colberg’s research shows that light physical activity (such as a 15-minute walk) after a meal can reduce postprandial glucose levels by up to 30%.⁷ In line with this, Heden’s research proves that physical activity after eating increases glucose uptake by muscles by up to 50% through GLUT4 activation.[34] Alghamdi also mentioned that in the Ramadan population, a 10-minute walk after iftar reduced 2-hour blood glucose by 22% compared to sitting still.⁸ In addition, WHO also recommends light activity (3-4 METs) for 15-30 minutes after a main meal to optimize glucose metabolism.[35].

3.3 Medical Recommendations: The Ideal Type of ‘Sweet’ for *Iftar*

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When it comes to choosing a sweet to break the fast, medical experts and the classical Middle Eastern medical heritage agree that the most important thing is to choose a natural source of sugar that is balanced with other nutrients. Dates, as a food recommended by the Prophet (PBUH), remain the top choice because they contain the perfect combination of fructose, glucose, fiber, and minerals such as potassium and magnesium. Modern research in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*[36] explains that dates have a more manageable glycemic index than refined sugar, so they don't cause drastic blood sugar spikes. In addition, their fiber content helps slow the absorption of sugar into the bloodstream, preventing the reactive hypoglycemia that often occurs after consuming processed sweets.

Fresh fruits such as grapes, watermelon, or pears are also ideal choices as apart from containing natural sugars, they are rich in water and vitamins. Ibn Qayyim in *al-Tibb al-Nabawi*[37] mentioned that fresh fruits can "soften" the stomach after an empty day and help restore energy without burdening the digestion. Meanwhile, honey-as mentioned in many classical Islamic medical literatures such as *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*[15] by Ibn Sina-is a natural sweetener that not only provides energy, but also has anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties. However, honey should be consumed in moderation due to its high fructose content.

Traditional foods such as sweet potato or banana compote can also be an alternative if modified wisely. In *Zad al-Ma'ad*[14] Ibn Qayyim explains that sweet potatoes and bananas provide complex carbohydrates that are slower to digest, making them suitable for maintaining energy stability. For a healthier version, the coconut milk in the compote can be replaced with low-fat milk or yogurt, while the sweetener is limited and combined with cinnamon, which according to a study in "Diabetes Care"[38] may help improve insulin sensitivity.

Muslims should avoid added sugar in packaged drinks, syrups, or processed sweets that only provide empty calories without meaningful nutrition. Al-Razi in *al-Hawi fi al-Tibb*[39] warns that excessive consumption of pure sugar can disrupt the body's fluid balance and trigger excessive thirst. This recommendation is in line with modern findings in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*[40] which shows that artificially sweetened drinks actually increase the risk of dehydration and electrolyte imbalance after fasting.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the tradition of breaking the fast with sweet foods and drinks has deep cultural and religious significance in Muslim communities, especially in Indonesia. However, the medical implications of consuming sweets during *iftar* should be carefully considered to maintain good health and wellness during the fasting month.

Therefore, a balanced approach to choosing sweets for *iftar*, taking into account natural sugar sources and regulating portion sizes, is essential to ensure the maintenance of metabolic stability and overall health during Ramadan.

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