

Should you fast while on medication?



By Leslie Morgan, OBE
CEO, Durbin PLC
Leslie Morgan is a Fellow of the Royal
Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain

As I write, many Muslims around the world are fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Patients that are taking medicines or indeed even those who are pregnant are exempt from fasting. However, doctors around the world are increasingly voicing their concerns over the numbers of people who fast while on medication.

The degree to which patients are prepared to delay treatment or cancel medical appointments during Ramadan does of course vary from person to person. In the UK doctors have warned that we have some patients who are putting their lives at risk by delaying or stopping vital medication, including cancer treatments, in order to focus on their religious obligations.

Many campaigns by community groups and organisations have been aimed at educating those with chronic health problems such as diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure – all of which are highly prevalent in the Middle East – about the risks associated with fasting. Other awareness programmes have

focused on pregnant women, advising against fasting because of the risk of hypoglycaemia, ketosis and dehydration. Whatever the campaign, the fundamental message is always the same: patients should always speak to a physician about how to stay safe and healthy as possible during Ramadan.

We must remember that fasting is a personal decision, and if somebody with a medical condition wishes to fast, doctors are unable to stop them. I have written about the high rate of diabetes in the Middle East before, and a large number of campaigns in the region have focused on providing those with the disease all the information and medical advice necessary to ensure they do not suffer from complications as a result of fasting.

Diabetics who face a high risk of complications if they fast include pregnant women, patients who need insulin injections and those whose blood sugar levels severely fluctuate. Fasting diabetics are advised to see their doctor a month before Ramadan to arrange a plan of how it can be achieved without harm. A drop or rise in sugar level can cause symptoms such as shivering, cold sweats, heart palpitations and slurred speech.

Medical experts have advised that diabetics should not overeat when they break their fast as this can cause blood sugar levels to rise dangerously. Eating a few smaller meals as opposed to one large one after sunset is a much safer option. They are also advised to wake up before dawn to eat their second meal so that the period of fasting is shortened as much as possible, thereby reducing the risk of hypoglycaemia and dehydration. Finally, diabetics should test their blood sugar levels in the middle of the day and before they break their fast. This is par-

ticularly important in the first few days of Ramadan. Exercise is also encouraged, especially after the fast has been broken.

It is a common misconception that exercise should be reduced during the holy month, when in reality it is still important to keep healthy, maintain energy levels and keep active. Furthermore, many people gain weight during Ramadan as large amounts of food are consumed late at night followed by sleep, causing the body to slow down. With obesity a growing concern in the region this is another factor that individuals should consider when planning their meals after breaking the fast.

Most Muslims believe that fasting is one of the basic tenets of Islam and that they have to fast whether they have a medical condition or not. A little bit of care and attention to diet, as well as discussing your medication programme with your doctor a month before Ramadan begins, is all it will take to ensure that you have a safe and healthy month. **MEH**

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 180 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.
Web address: www.durbin.co.uk
Email: L.morgan@durbin.co.uk