

**There are some seasons** when you expect to gain weight, and in this part of the world, Ramadan month is definitely on top of that list – lots of eating, rich food at that, little or no exercise and a body clock that doesn't know if its coming or going. Aquarius gives you some simple tips to keep fit this year.

TEXT: **BERNADETTE ABRAHAM**

# Stay in shape for Ramadan

**RAMADAN, THE ISLAMIC** Holy month, is a time for prayers, inner reflection, and self-control. While it is a time for spiritual upliftment, from a health standpoint however, these thirty days can wreak havoc on a person's body if care is not taken with the decisions made following iftar (breaking the fast).

Feeling lethargic and tired after a long day of fasting and work leads the majority to laze around the entire evening, especially after a very large meal. Unfortunately, the consequences can be harsh: headaches, fatigue, indigestion, intestinal discomfort, and certainly unaccounted weight gain. It is possible however, to avoid this and make Ramadan a healthier month by following these simple exercise tips that will keep you in shape, and feeling heaps better too.

Although it is not advisable to exercise while fasting because of the high risk of dehydration, there are other times during the day that are perfect for exercise – before the Maghrib Athan and iftar, after iftar, and before suhour (sunrise). Exercise is known to curb the appetite for a short period of time, so it can help hold off cravings and allow for healthier food choices later on.

## During the day

Low intensity exercises such as walking, swimming, pilates, and yoga are some great options for the afternoons. Since energy levels are very low and usually even water is not consumed, only non-strenuous exercises are suitable at this time. It is extremely important to avoid excessive sweating and dehydration.

Try the following four Pilates moves to boost energy levels and stay fit without causing over-exertion. The beauty of Pilates is that it can be done anywhere the body can fit at full length; an even bigger advantage is being able to workout while lying down. Use a thick mat or pad that is dense enough to support and protect the vertebrae of the spine.

It is important to understand that all Pilates exercises initiate from the muscles of the abdominals, lower back, hips, and buttocks, also known as the 'powerhouse'. The arms and legs do benefit from the exercises as well, except that much of the emphasis comes from the core or powerhouse and radiates to the extremities.

### Pilates Move #1: The One Hundred –

A breathing exercise that is meant to get the blood circulating to the working muscles in

preparation for the exercises that follow.

Lie on your back with your knees bent at a ninety degree angle and feet off the floor. Place your arms by your sides with your palms facing down. As you exhale, let your chest and stomach sink into the mat by imagining a weight pressing the torso down. Look at your belly button by raising your shoulder blades slightly off of the floor, and maintain this position throughout the exercise.

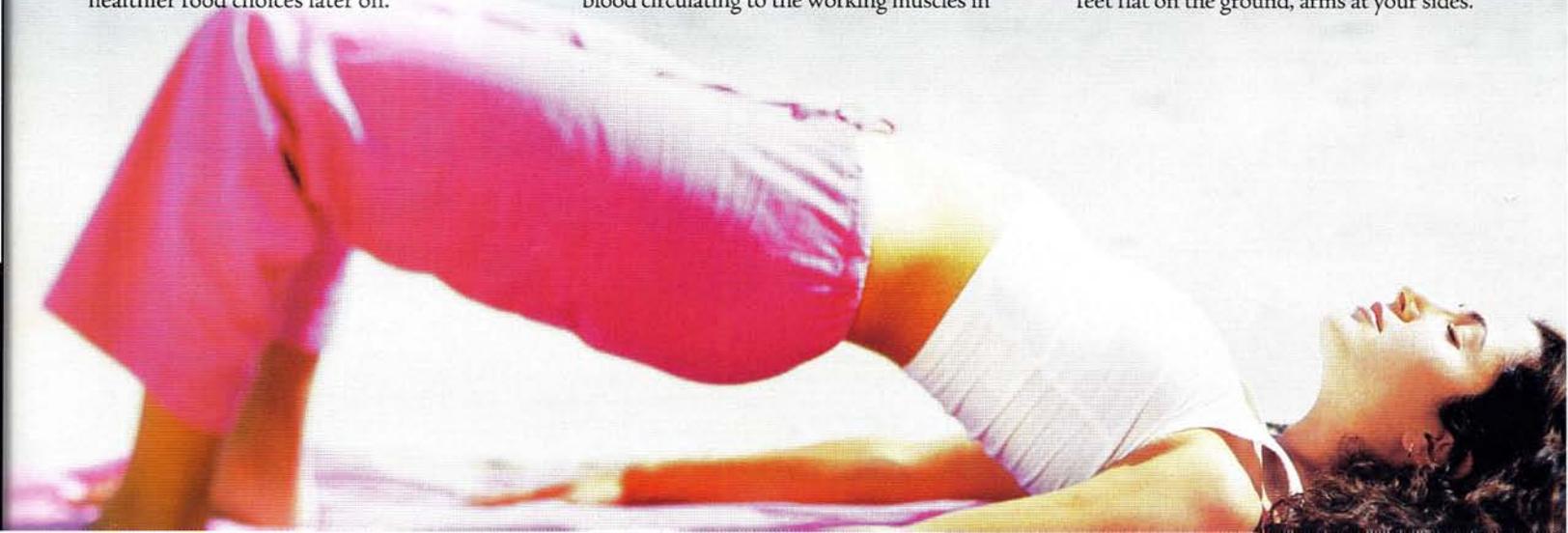
Then, stretch your arms as far forward as possible, as if you were trying to touch the wall across the room with your fingertips. Begin pumping your arms up and down as you inhale and exhale every five counts. Do this for one hundred counts.

**Trainer's tip:** Do not hold your breath during this exercise. Also, if it hurts your neck, rest your head on the floor or place a small pillow or rolled towel under your head for support.

### Pilates Move #2: The Roll-Up –

Engages the muscles of the powerhouse and also stretches the hamstrings and spine. The key to this exercise is rhythm.

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the ground, arms at your sides.



Inhale, tuck your chin to your chest, and squeeze your buttocks and knees together as you roll your body up to a sitting position. Next, exhale as you straighten the legs and stretch the body and arms forward - imagine your body taking the shape of the letter C.

Then, exhale and reverse the sequence, feeling each vertebrae pressing into the mat on the way down. Rest your head and arms on the floor when the shoulder blades have touched the mat. Repeat eight to ten times.

**Trainer's tip:** Do not allow your feet to lift off the ground as you roll up or roll down. For beginners, place the hands on the underside of the legs to help roll up. Also, keep your chin tucked into the chest as you roll up and back down so that you are not pulling from the neck.

### Pilates Move #3: Side Lying Front & Back Kicks

Helps strengthen the muscles of the hips and buttocks. It also stretches the hamstrings and improves body balance.

Lie on your side with both legs straight and in line with each other. Rest your head against the palm of one hand and place other palm on the floor to help support and balance the body. Inhale and swing the top leg forward keeping it parallel to the floor. Perform two small kicks when you have gone as far forward as you can without bending at the waist. Exhale and perform the same sequence to the back without compromising form. Perform this exercise eight to ten times and repeat on the opposite side.

**Trainer's tip:** Imagine that you are balancing a hot cup of tea on your shoulder - this will help keep your hips and shoulders stable by engaging the muscles of the powerhouse. If your neck hurts, rest your head against the inside of your upper arm.

### Pilates Move #4: Side Lying Up & Down Kicks

This exercise helps strengthen the muscles of the hips, buttocks, and outer thighs. It also stretches the inner thigh muscles.

Lie on your side with both legs straight and in line with each other. Slightly turn the top leg out from the hip and thigh so that the knee is almost facing the ceiling. Rest your head against the palm of one hand and place the other palm on the floor to help support and balance the body.

Inhale and lift the top leg towards the ceiling while keeping it straight. Avoid the urge to sink into your waist or shoulders as you lift your leg. Exhale and lower the leg back down slowly to resist gravity. As you lower the leg, remember to lengthen the leg from the hip by pressing away from your torso. Perform this exercise eight to ten times and repeat on the opposite side.

## After hours

An ideal time for working out is right after iftar. Instead of eating a very large meal at iftar, opt for something lighter, such as dried dates, freshly squeezed fruit juices, or even a bowl of traditional lentil soup with a glass of water to provide the body with sufficient energy to exercise.

### Nutrition Tips

1. Gradually decrease caffeine intake to help minimise the headaches. Caffeine acts as a vasoconstrictor, which decreases circulation in the blood vessels of the brain; the sudden decrease of caffeine due to fasting increases the blood circulation and causes headaches.
2. Drink plenty of water. The increased intake of tea and coffee during Ramadan can cause dehydration. A healthy practice is to drink water or fruit juice with every meal.
3. Substitute starches like pita bread and rice with more vegetables. For example, instead of eating tabouleh with pita bread, opt for lettuce or raw cabbage. Hummus is also great as a vegetable dip for carrots, celery, cucumbers, green peppers, broccoli, and cauliflower.
4. Limit desserts or substitute with fruits. Although it may be difficult to avoid sweets completely during Ramadan, remember to practice moderation. Fruits, which are naturally sweet and rich in vitamins, minerals, and anti-oxidants, are great alternatives.
5. Train your mind and practice self-control. Avoid the fat-laden foods and sweets and make the decision to refrain from unhealthy foods by saying "I don't want" instead of "I can't have".

Exercising on a very full stomach is uncomfortable and can cause most of the blood supply to be pushed away from the working muscles into the stomach, leading to muscle cramps and low energy. Since the body has been without food for twelve hours, eating a lighter meal allows the digestive system to prepare for nutrient processing as well; a more moderate meal can be eaten after the workout.

It is also important to drink plenty of water while exercising, to replenish the body's fluids. A meal high in protein and complex carbohydrates eaten one or two hours after an exercise session is ideal to maintain and build muscle strength.

### Stay in or go out?

Group fitness classes are beneficial for those who need the extra support and motivation to

exercise during Ramadan. Most gyms, if not all, adjust their aerobic schedule to accommodate the change of routine during Ramadan. Commit to taking at least three classes per week, and bring a friend along to ensure attendance.

For an at-home solution, there are many effective exercises that can be performed without the use of equipment. Choose an exercise for each major muscle group for a complete body workout. Train the muscles in descending order of size, beginning with the largest muscle groups and ending with the smallest.

This includes the quadriceps (front of the thigh), hamstrings (back of the thigh), buttocks, back, abdominals, chest, shoulders, triceps (back of the upper arm), and biceps (front of the upper arm). Begin with one set of twelve to twenty repetitions for each exercise and gradually increase the number of sets as the muscles adapt and gain strength.

### Night fever

For the early-birds, exercising right before suhour (sunrise) is also a valid option. Not only does it help jump-start your day, but a light snack, such as a yogurt and fruit afterwards can help you feel more energised and less sluggish during the day.

It is best to select lighter activities to avoid dehydrating the body before a long day of fasting. Stretching exercises, like yoga or tai chi connect the mind and body through a series of body poses and meditation. A brisk walk or casual bike ride are also light and refreshing exercises that can help get the day started.

And as a rule, throughout the day, try and become more active. Simple changes in the daily routine can make a difference; take the stairs, park your car a little further away from the destination and walk - and enjoy the improving weather, or take a brisk walk after iftar.

Shopping is also a great activity - especially with all the fab Ramadan sales going on - since it requires a lot of walking. Just remember to walk up the escalators instead of letting it do the work for you! Exchange television for other activities like cleaning after a meal or playing cards with family or friends. With a little self-control, Ramadan can truly detoxify your body and help shed a few unwanted pounds.

Aquarius recommends consulting a physician or fitness expert before beginning a new exercise programme or suddenly increasing activity levels. For more exercise tips, contact Bernadette Abraham at 050-283-2020 or Bernadette@mailme.ae