

The Surprising Link Between Islamic Medicine and Modern Medicine

Are there any benefits to applying advice derived from religious texts to our daily lives?

Wasif Habib, Staff Reporter

Usually, when you're sick or just looking for self-care tips, you'd reach out to your physicians or online websites—as anyone would. But have you ever thought to seek self-care advice from religious texts?

Islam is the second largest of the three Abrahamic religions, and the most recent of them. There are two major sects, Sunni and Shia—Sunni being the mainstream branch, with roughly 1.7 billion Sunnis worldwide. In Sunni Islam, Muslims derive their religion from two texts: the Quran and Hadith. The Quran is the holy book of Islam, and the Hadith are narrations of the life of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as reported by his companions and people living within his society over 1400 years ago.



Wasif Habib

Here is a photo of the Quran placed on a stand in front of a stethoscope. The Quran is opened to its 16th chapter, entitled, 'The Bee,' a chapter about how all the creations and wonders of the natural world are a proof of God's divinity.



In Islam, Muslims say, “peace and blessings be upon him” after the mention of their Prophet, which in Arabic, is represented by the Unicode character ﷺ. Depicted above is calligraphy of Muhammad (ﷺ)’s name in Arabic, with the ﷺ seen in middle of the top-left. (Photo Credit: Raiyan Zakaria / Unsplash)

In Islam, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, an illiterate man known to be calm, sincere, fair, and truthful by his community before prophethood, is said to be sent by God for many reasons. One being to reestablish pure monotheism, and another being to serve as a role model, a guide for humanity to follow.

The Hadith are a collection of narrations and reports from the Muslims that lived during Muhammad ﷺ’s time that detail how he ﷺ lived his life—his actions and behaviors. The actions and behaviors from these reports meant to be imitated by Muslims are known as the *Sunnah*. Applying the Sunnah to one’s life can be as simple as saying *Bismillah* (In the name of God) before eating, bringing great blessings.

Beyond theology, both the Quran and Sunnah contain advice for mankind, guiding them on how they can take care of themselves spiritually, mentally, and physically. For physical health, there are numerous examples, ranging from how one should sleep throughout the day to the position in which one should eat or drink. These various pieces of advice became traditional Islamic medical practices during the Islamic Golden Age, and are still present today. The Islamic Golden Age was a period of scientific, economic, and cultural flourishing in Islamic history that had a large impact on the world. This led to the spread of Arab texts in Europe by merchants, which is why Islamic medicinal practices spread throughout the world.

Two famous books from this time period were *The Prophetic Medicine* by *Ibn Qayyim*, and *The Canon of Medicine*, by *Ibn Sina*, known by the western world as *Avicenna*, which remained at large medical authority until the 18th and 19th century (however, Ibn Sina is considered a heretic). The authors of both books largely drew inspiration from the Quran and Sunnah. And today, the Quran and Sunnah are being backed up by modern science.

Fasting

It's hard to talk about Islamic health without mentioning what Muslims around the world have been observing for the entirety of this past March—Ramadan. According to Islamic tradition, Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar in which Muslims dry fast—abstaining from food and water for a set period of time— from dawn to sunset, commanded by God in order to grow closer to Him. O believers! Fasting is prescribed for you—as it was for those before you [i.e. the followers of previous prophets]—so perhaps you will become mindful of God. (Quran 2:183)



Here is a photo of worshippers breaking their fast in the second holiest mosque in Islam, Al Masjid an Nabawi (The Prophet's Mosque), in Medina, Saudi Arabia. (Photo taken by @madeenahalmunawwara on Instagram).

As Muslims foster their connection with God, they rid their souls of negativity and heedlessness.

They also rid their bodies of cholesterol, excess fat, and other toxins that are usually stored in fat.

There is a general consensus that dry fasting reduces blood cholesterol levels, regulates blood sugar levels, can gradually reduce an individual's appetite size by giving their digestive system a rest, and overall enables them to lose weight at greater ease. There is also a positive correlation between dry fasting and lower blood pressure.

In addition, dry fasting can improve insulin levels, according to Dr. Babar Basir, an interventional cardiologist at Henry Ford Health in Detroit, in an interview with heart.org. He adds that dry fasting boosts both mood and mental clarity through the development and growth of new brain cells. Additionally, it increases production of human growth hormones, helping to burn fat.

Outside of Ramadan, Muslims are recommended to do these dry fasts on Mondays and Thursdays, as well as the 13th, 14th, and 15th of every month in the Islamic calendar.

Fasting every Monday and Thursday aligns with a modern dieting technique called the 5:2 Diet, invented by Dr. Michael Mosley, in which an individual starts the week fasting, takes a two-day break, fasts again, and finally takes the weekend off before taking another fast. This technique provides all the benefits of fasting mentioned earlier.

All of these benefits help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer. Additionally, dry fasting is a theory as to why the rates of those diseases are so low in the Middle East, as Islam is the religious majority in the Middle East.

What should we break our fasts with?

Anas bin Malik reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said: “Whoever has dried dates, then let him break the fast with that, and whoever does not, then let him break the fast with water, for indeed water is purifying.” (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 694)



Pictured is a photo of dates being served in Al Masjid an Nabawi. (Photo taken by @madeenahalmunawwara on Instagram; used by permission).

Other than being deliciously sweet, dates are beneficial to us as they are high in fiber, improve gut and heart health, and are full of antioxidants that help prevent diseases, among many other benefits. Additionally, dates are full of electrolytes and have high concentrations of recommended daily amounts of copper, magnesium, vitamin B6, potassium, and manganese, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Breaking our fasts with dates allows us to replenish ourselves with the nutrients we need, and drinking water afterwards helps get those nutrients flowing throughout our systems, maintaining hydration throughout the entire day.

The ⅓ approach

Other than fasting, how else can one change their eating habits to maintain good health?

Well, one way is to balance what we consume in a neat ratio of thirds.

Miqdam bin Madikarib reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

“A human being fills no worse vessel than his stomach. It is sufficient for a human being to eat a few mouthfuls to keep his spine straight. But if he must [fill it], then one third of food, one third for drink and one third for air.” (Sunan Ibn Majah 3349)

The purpose of this wisdom is to prevent people from overeating, as well as drinking too much water. Overeating often leaves people in food comas—a state of sluggish and lethargic behavior. It is also the primary cause of obesity.

Drinking too much water, on the other hand, makes it difficult for the kidney to get rid of excess water. This leaves an individual at risk of having their blood’s sodium content diluted and having hyponatremia. Additionally, drinking too much water can lead to excess bloating.

How should we eat and drink?

Anas reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) forbade us from drinking while standing. Qatadah reported: “We asked him: ‘What about eating?’” He said: “That is even worse, [or maybe he said] more detestable.” (Riyad as-Salihin 770)

There are several other narrations of the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) doing otherwise, demonstrating that this is not a strict ruling, rather simply a recommendation.

This recommendation has its benefits. Eating while standing up causes food to travel down the digestive track faster, causing overeating, discomfort due to gas, bloating, and cramps.

On the other hand, eating while sitting down enables one to eat mindfully. In an interview with the American hospital Henry Ford Health’s online blog, Dr. Mustafa Al-Shammari, a gastroenterologist at Henry Ford Health, says that when sitting down for a meal, eating at a leisurely pace allows one to eat mindfully, which allows for food to stay in the stomach longer, helping one feel full faster, and preventing overeating. He also adds that someone who eats while sitting down tends to spend more time chewing on their food, which aids digestion.

Drinking water while sitting is beneficial for the same reason—it allows the water to travel down the digestive tract at a regular pace, aiding our kidneys in filtering the water, as well as preventing us from taking in extra air while drinking.

On the topic of water, there is also a recommended way as to how we should drink water as well.

Anas also narrated that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) drank water in three breaths or sips, and he (ﷺ) said that that is more enjoyable and more healthy. (Sahih al-Bukhari 5631)

Drinking water like this allows one to drink mindfully, making it enjoyable. It is also scientifically healthier.

More often than not, people chug down their water when thirsty. However, in an article on physiology.org, Lindsay Baker, PhD, a senior principal scientist at the Gatorade Sports Science Institute, says that suddenly taking in water in large quantities like this usually just ends up in the water exiting through urine.

This is caused by the body’s bolus response, which is the protective response against hyponatremia—when our kidneys are unable to deal with the excess water.

In the future, remember to take sips, so your body absorbs the water you drink, and so your urine excretion is six times lower.

What other foods are recommended?

Other than dates, there are several other foods that are recommended, such as talbina.

Talbina is a kind of gruel made of flour or bran and milk, sometimes mixed with honey as well. Talbina has many benefits, such as boasting a high antioxidant count, functioning like a natural antidepressant, and more.

‘A’isha was reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

“Talbina gives rest to an invalid’s heart [faint of heart, i.e. someone facing grief] and removes some of his grief.” (Mishkat al-Masabih 4179)



Here is a photo of Indonesian talbina. (Photo Credit: Ian doang, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

A possibility as to why talbina functions as an antidepressant is due to its high count and concentration in healthy carbohydrates, which in turns begins the process of serotonin synthesis.

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter and hormone that plays an important role in several body functions, such as regulating mood and sleep. Without it, we are at risk of depression, anxiety, sleep issues, and overall poor health. So, the boost in serotonin levels that talbina’s healthy carbohydrates bring is a possible explanation as to why talbina notoriously puts people into a deep, relaxing, and soothing sleep, waking up feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

Honey

Verse 69 of the Quran’s 16th chapter, titled, *The Bee*, states:

and feed from 'the flower of' any fruit 'you please' and follow the ways your Lord has made easy for you." From their bellies comes forth liquid of varying colors, in which there is healing for people. Surely in this is a sign for those who reflect. (Quran 16:69)

Additionally, it was reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

"If anyone licks honey three mornings every month, he will not be afflicted with any serious trouble." (Mishkat al-Masabih 4570)



Here is a picture of a half empty jar of honey. (Wasif Habib)

The "liquid of varying colors" mentioned in Quran chapter 16 verse 69 refers to honey, as honey can be found in several different colors. Honey is deemed a natural medicine in Islam, used for treating ailments, which is why it's included in talbina. Today, modern science makes the benefits of honey abundantly clear.

Honey is, as we all well know, mostly made up of mostly sugar. However, it is also made up of various vitamins, minerals, iron, amino acids, and antioxidants. These contents make honey a good anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antidepressant, and antibacterial agent, reducing the risk of several forms of diseases.

Today, we can see honey used medically, from medical grade honey ointments used on wounds to cough syrups.

Black seeds and black seed oil

Black seeds, or black cumin, both refer to the *Nigella sativa* plant. They are tiny black seeds that are traditionally used as spices in cooking and used in medicine. What does Islam say about them?

Abu Huraira narrated that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

“This black cumin is healing for all diseases except As-Sam [Death].” (Sahih al-Bukhari 5688)

Fun fact: Abu Huraira was a companion of the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ), and his name directly translates to “Father of a Kitten,” due to his immense, noticeable love for cats.



Here is a picture of a bottle of black seed oil. (Wasif Habib)

There are two views on this narration. One is that it is general in meaning, so it literally means it can help towards the healing of all diseases. The second view is that it is general in wording, but its meaning is specific, so what he (ﷺ) said meant only some diseases.

It seems that this claim holds to this day, as the *Nigella sativa* plant possesses a phytochemical compound called thymoquinone, that possesses anticonvulsant, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, anti-carcinogenic, and antibacterial properties.

Black seed is usually taken as an oil, or an oil in capsule form, helping our bodies build acquired immunity, battle asthma, cancer, infertility, improve skin quality, and much more.

Olive oil

‘Umar reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

“Season (your food) with olive oil and anoint yourselves with it, for it comes from a blessed tree.” (Sunan Ibn Majah 3319)



Here is a picture of a bottle of olive oil and olive oil poured in a pitcher. (Photo Credit: Jacek Halicki, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

The Qur'an has a shorter chapter that mentions the olive tree, titled "The Fig" (At-Tin in Arabic). It is said that it is a blessed tree whose oil is blessed. This is also a view in Christianity and Judaism.

Olive oil is a good way to put on some weight while bulking, as it is a healthy fat. It is a monounsaturated fatty acid, which has been shown to regulate and maintain healthy cholesterol levels.

Additionally, olive oil, like black seed oil, is anticarcinogenic and reduces illness and slows down the progression of cardiovascular, neurodegenerative and cancer diseases.

Food aside, what about our oral health?

With all these healthy foods, surely there's something we can use to clean out our mouths after meals and take care of our oral health, right?

That's where *siwaak*, or *miswak*, comes into play.

Siwaak is a natural tool for brushing teeth: it is a stick that comes from the Arak tree, scientifically known as *salvadora persica*, and colloquially known as the "toothbrush" or "miswak" tree. Also known as the mustard tree, and it is native to Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

Abu Hurairah reported that the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

"Had I not thought it difficult for my Ummah [all Muslims], I would have commanded them to use the Miswak (tooth-stick) before every Salat [prayer]." (Riyad as-Salihin 1196)

It was also reported by 'Aisha that he (ﷺ) said:

"The Miswak (tooth-stick) cleanses and purifies the mouth and pleases the Rubb [Lord]." (Riyad as-Salihin 1202)



Here is an image of siwak, or miswak, after an inch of bark has been stripped away and the wood underneath has been bitten to form into soft bristles. (Photo Credit: Nvilko, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

Clearly, there is an emphasis on the use of this natural wooden toothbrush, but are the benefits really that impactful, and are they any better than a regular toothbrush?

Well, the consensus across numerous studies is that siwak has numerous benefits, such as anti-plaque, orthodontic chain preservation (helpful for those with braces), anti-gingivitis, biocompatibility with oral cells, promotion of gingival wound healing, and anti-cariogenic properties. Additionally, siwak contains antiviral and antibacterial properties, keeping cavities at bay.

It's no wonder that siwak is considered just as good as the traditional nylon toothbrush. It is also no wonder that siwak use has become a trend on TikTok, where people share their journey using the stick, documenting their progress on their oral health. Heightened interest in siwak has been sparked due to its natural, healthy nature and its promising, cost-effective teeth whitening properties. Traditional teeth whitening options can get expensive, upwards to hundreds of the dollars. On the other hand, you can get yourself a siwak stick for only \$12 on Amazon.



Here is a picture of siwak stick from an olive tree branch in a vacuum pack seal. (Wasif Habib)

How do I use a siwak stick?

When purchasing a siwak stick and taking it out of the package, it is recommended to leave it in a small cup of either regular or rose water. Don't put the entire stick in the water. Leave it in for 10-15 minutes.

After 10-15 minutes, take the siwak out and cut about 1 inch of the skin off of the stick. Alternatively, you could use your teeth to bite the skin off.

Finally, use your teeth, ideally your molars, to gently bite on the newly revealed part of the stick, in order to break it down. Your final product should make this end of the stick feel soft, and bristle-like. Happy brushing!

Keep in mind that there is a slight taste to the stick, and it may not be for everyone—or it may take some getting used to. Alternatively, you could purchase a siwak stick that is pre-flavored.

Personally, I'm currently using natural siwak from an olive tree, and the taste and softness of the bristles are much nicer than any other stick I've tried.

Is there any advice related to sleep?

Anas, a companion of the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “They used to gather and then take a midday nap.” (Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 1240)

Naturally, we all go through the afternoon slump, between 1-4 p.m., due to our bodies' natural circadian rhythms. In American work culture, there is a strong emphasis on hard work and fighting off laziness. However, this midday nap is prevalent across the world, especially in the Mediterranean, which consists of regions such as North Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and countries like Spain.

Spain popularized these naps in the European world, dubbed siestas. These short siestas help, contrary to American belief, improve health and boost productivity, enabling both students and employees to perform well.

What about the Muslim prayer's prostrations?

In Islam, the word for prostration is *sujud*, and sujud is not unique to Islamic prayers. It is present in both Orthodox Christianity and Orthodox Judaism, and it is seen as a gesture of submission to God.



Here is a photo of worshippers in prostration performing prayer at Al Masjid an Nabawi. (Photo taken by @madeenahalmunawwara on Instagram; used by permission)

This position has also been shown to provide benefits. Dr. Stephen Sinatra, cardiologist, psychotherapist, and nutrition and aging specialist, has conducted research on a wellness technique called grounding, or earthing. It is when someone—as the name suggests—makes a connection with the earth or ground.

In an interview with the Saudi Gazette, Dr. Sinatra said, “Grounding can restore and stabilize the bioelectrical circuitry that governs your physiology and organs, harmonize your basic biological rhythms, boost self-healing mechanisms, reduce inflammation and pain, and improve your sleep and feeling of calmness.”

And when Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Orthodox Jews prostrate, they are grounding at the same time, bringing them these abundant benefits.

Additionally, in this position, worshippers tend to express *Shukr*, meaning gratitude, and ask for forgiveness. Both of these are great ways to boost mental clarity, spirituality, and overall mood.

What can we take away from all of this?

It is evidently clear that science supports these wisdoms from the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ), despite his illiteracy, and these wisdoms certainly provide benefits to those who apply them to their lives. Furthermore, they provide people a much more natural alternative to modern medicine or supplements, proving to be effective.

Whether or not you believe in God, or follow any sort of organized religion, these wisdoms as to how one should take deal with their health demonstrate that there are values and advice that can be taken from most belief systems, like religion, such as the maintenance of good morals, gratefulness, self-care, and so on. In chapter 49 of the Qur'an, titled, *The Chambers*, various social and ethical issues are discussed. Verse 13 states:

O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may 'get to' know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.

(Quran 49:13)

The message of this verse is that regardless of what anyone thinks, everyone from any part of the world is part of one group—mankind. Yes, we are split up into different nationalities and live in different borders, however we can use that opportunity to learn from each other, not hate.

The world is a very diverse place with countless beliefs, ideologies, religions, and cultures. These values are certainly present in other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism. So, in this increasingly polarizing world, it is important to take the time to connect with and understand those who are different from us, as there's always a thing or two to learn from others. After taking that time, it becomes clear that we are not all so different after all.

Usually, when you're sick or just looking for self-care tips, you'd reach out to your physicians or online websites—as anyone would. But have you ever thought to seek self-care advice from religious texts?