

Pregnancy, Nursing, and Ramadan

This article was written by Stacey Greaves and posted online in Motherhood on 06 August 2011. At the time Stacey, an American mom of five children and an accredited La Leche League International Leader/Breastfeeding Counselor, Doula, and Childbirth Educator, was living in Ha'il, Saudi Arabia.

It's that time of year again, *Ramadan* has arrived. Families make plans to host *iftars*. Grocery stores bring in special foods. People look at their homes and consider decorating changes. Parents remind their children that we are fasting. Everyone has prepared for the arrival of the month of *Ramadan*.

Fasting during *Ramadan* is obligatory upon all able-bodied adults. There are, however, a few exceptions.

Those exceptions include women who are pregnant or breastfeeding who may opt not to fast. Every year I get phone calls, emails, or requests in person for information about fasting while pregnant or breastfeeding a baby. Pregnant mothers are always wondering if fasting will be harmful for them or their baby. ***“Will I have enough energy?” “Will my labor start early?” “Will I or my baby lose weight? Or will we get sick?”*** Breastfeeding mothers wonder, ***“Will I have enough milk for my baby?” “Will my health be affected?”*** They wonder how they can be sure to take care of their babies and themselves. They ask all sorts of questions because, let's face it: **Moms tend to worry!**

One thing is for certain, each woman, in fact each pregnancy or nursing experience, is different. It is important for each mother to weigh her current situation individually. Sometimes a mother will feel pressure from a loved one or friend. Her aunt might say, ***“I fasted the entire month of Ramadan while pregnant. Three times. Why can't you do it?”*** A friend might advise, ***“When I was breastfeeding my son, I was scared I would lose all my milk. So I didn't fast the entire month.”***

Personally I have fasted while pregnant, while breastfeeding, and while breastfeeding during a pregnancy. I have also not fasted at those times. I have done it all. However, I would never advise a mom to fast or to not fast based on my own personal experiences. All I can do is to give her the needed information, support her in her decision, and trust that she knows how her body feels and what her baby needs.

A pregnant mother may have less energy and feel more fatigued. She may be dealing with morning sickness or other changes that come from pregnancy. She must first decide if any of these symptoms will make fasting difficult for her. A mother who suffers from nausea may find that eating small meals, fairly often settles her stomach. In her case, she may not fast for fear of being sick for a whole day. If a mother has trouble gaining weight during her pregnancy, she might find fasting to exacerbate her problem. These moms would have to think twice about fasting. If you are in doubt as to whether or not you are able to fast, consult a doctor.

Some mothers are not as affected by these pregnancy related changes (either because of where she is in her pregnancy, or because she simply isn't troubled by these things). These women might choose to fast. If this is your case, go ahead and try to fast for a day. If you are able to get through the day easily, wonderful; if not, it might be best to break your fast. Some mothers find they are able to fast one day, but not the next. So, she might choose to fast, then skip a day, then fast, then skip a day again. One year when I was eight months pregnant, I discovered that I could fast for three days in a row. If I tried a fourth day, I felt weak and was miserable. So I fasted three days on, one day off for the whole month. Some women may fast for two days on one day off. Any number of combinations of fasting and skipping days may work for a pregnant woman. The key is for her to discover what works for her at the time.

After the blessed event of birth, a woman is not yet done nourishing her baby. When nine months of gestation end, months (or years) of breastfeeding begin. Breastfeeding mothers are concerned about their baby's health and their

milk supply. Mothers often ask, “*Should I fast while I am nursing my baby?*” Well, that is a hard question to answer. Remember, every woman’s body is different. Each nursing baby is also different. In other words, a mother who is breastfeeding a second or subsequent baby may very well have a different experience from a previous breastfeeding baby. A mother may have had no problems fasting while nursing before, and still have concerns about fasting while breastfeeding a current baby.

A breastfeeding mother’s concern is her baby’s health. Will he get enough milk? Will mother’s milk supply decrease? It is important to be aware of any changes in your baby. If he seems hungrier or fussier than normal and there is no other cause, you may need to consider that your milk supply has been affected. Observing baby’s output is an easy way to check if he is getting enough milk. What goes in must come out. Has she noticed a change in her baby’s diaper output? Does her baby have the same elimination pattern that was established before fasting began? Be aware of changes in wet (urine) or soiled (bowel movement) diapers. If the mother believes her baby is not getting enough milk, she can check baby’s weight for confirmation.

Studies have shown that complete fasting during the daylight hours (the fast of Ramadan) does not affect a mother’s milk supply. However, there is a concern about the mother becoming dehydrated. If she becomes dehydrated, her milk supply might decrease. Additionally she may not feel well. Symptoms of dehydration include: feeling very thirsty, passing dark-colored and strong-smelling urine, feeling weak or faint, or developing a headache or other pain. If any of these symptoms are experienced, a mother should take note and rethink her decision to fast. It is especially difficult during the hot summer months when days are long.

In both cases (pregnancy and breastfeeding), if a woman chooses to fast, she should pay attention to what she eats and drinks during the evening hours. Be sure to drink, drink, drink. Water is the best drink. Fruit or vegetable juices are also good. Sugary and/or caffeinated drinks should be limited.

One solution for fasting mothers who are pregnant or nursing is to eat a meal in addition to *suhoor* and *iftar*. (A fasting mom should be sure not to skip *suhoor*.) Some women will eat a late dinner, hoping to replace what she missed out on during the day. A mother should concern herself with eating well-balanced meals when fasting. Include plenty of fruits and vegetables in her diet. For the pre-dawn meal, mothers should eat a filling meal. High fiber and complex carbohydrates are more filling. Limit your sweets and opt for fresh fruit instead.

Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers should be sure to get plenty of rest. Taking a nap in the afternoon is a great way to recharge a mother's batteries. Errands, housework, anything that might zap your energy should be done earlier in the day when you have more energy. Toward the end of the day, it may help to relax, or do easier activities only. Even on normal days, people tend to feel tired, irritable, or hungry at the end of the day. This is even more true when a pregnant or breastfeeding mother is fasting.

All in all, a pregnant or breastfeeding mother can safely fast if she is up to it. She should feel no pressure from anyone in either case. She must decide if she is able to fast. If you make the decision to fast, get enough rest, limit your afternoon activities, be sure to eat and drink well, and observe your baby for problems. Keeping these tips in mind, fasting during *Ramadan* while pregnant or breastfeeding can safely be accomplished.