

Background article: Expressions, *Halal* and *haram*

Dietary Laws

According to the Qur'an, certain types of food are forbidden or *haram* [Q. 5:1; 5:3a; 2:173]: carrion, blood and pork. Carrion describes any animal which has died from natural causes, disease, accident or those animals which eat dead animals. Blood includes liquid blood or food made from it. Pork is anything from the pig. Guided by this, Muslim scholars generally outlaw eating scavengers such as dogs or crows. Pigs are explicitly ruled out by the Qur'an, although there were many other practical reasons for avoiding pork in hot countries such as its tendency to turn bad rapidly. Pigs are notoriously omnivorous, including eating dead bodies when they can, and scientists have detected parasites in pork flesh that are easily transferable to human beings. This shows the way in which an instruction in the Qur'an, which must be obeyed for that reason alone, can be substantiated by human knowledge with the progress of science. Modern industrialized food production has created problems for Muslims, as all sorts of additives are included in manufactured foods. The danger is that these have unacceptable elements such as pig products in them. Bread or cakes might contain lard or suet from a *haram* source. Sweets can contain gelatine from *haram* sources.

When animals have to be killed, there are strict regulations governing the way they are to be kept and slaughtered [Q. 6:118-121]. After being reared humanely, they are to be killed as quickly and painlessly as possible. Whilst they await slaughter, they are to be allowed to rest, given food and water and are not to be allowed to see or hear other animals being killed. These humane provisions keep the animals calm and do not allow a build-up of adrenaline in their tissues. Thanks must be given to God for its life before the animal is killed with a single cut to the throat by a skilled person. The effect is instantly to cut off the supply of blood to the brain, so that suffering is minimal. The blood must then be allowed to drain from the body. One of the functions of the blood is to carry away impurities to be broken down and released by the body; draining the blood removes these as far as possible. Methods of slaughter that do not allow the release of blood are not acceptable to Muslims. Animals should only be killed when necessary for food or other practical reasons; animals are part of God's creation. Hunting or shooting simply for sport is forbidden.

In the case of water-living creatures, most Muslim scholars accept them as *halal* (permitted) no matter how they are killed, provided that they are alive when they leave the water. For the Shi'a and the Hanafi schools of Islam, fish must have scales and fins to be *halal*, other schools generally approve seafood, as the sea is considered clean.

All vegetables, plants and fruit (apart from those substances that could be classified as "drugs") are *halal* for Muslims with no particular rules about their preparation. Vegetarianism is permitted as long as one doesn't claim that meat-eating is wrong [Q. 5:87-88].

Alcohol in all its forms is forbidden under Islamic law, whether it is to drink or in cooking [Q. 5:90-91]. Even in medicines, an alcoholic base would be avoided if at all possible.