

Preventive Measures of Health in Islam

- Javid Ahmad Bhat

Abstract

Perfect health is a wish that humans pine for. They know that they can never manage this state of perfection, if only because they cannot envisage what is perfect. Accordingly, they satisfy themselves with a relative good health, where the individual would be living without looming suffering or pain. As living organisms, humans are subject to genetic and environmental influences that affect the functioning of their organs. Any negative effect would cause a disease. Islam advocates of building an ideal human society wherein its members may be able to cultivate all the physical, mental, and spiritual faculties fully. Therefore, it could not have remained without inspiring its followers to improve their health and hygiene, because the sound physical and mental health is essential not only to enjoy comfort and pleasures of this world, but also to understand the purpose of life as well as relationship with the Creator and His creation. To fulfill this mission that Islam combines spiritual bliss with material wellbeing by exhorting its followers to work simultaneously for both material advantages and spiritual enlightenment. In this paper I have tried to illuminate that the guidelines regarding preventive measures given in the Quran and Sunnah concerned with the promotion of physical health of humans, based on the following headings, aside the introduction and conclusion: Purity, Health, Nutrition, Diet as a Part of the Cure, Exercise and Sex Hygiene.

Key Words: Preventive Measures, Purity, Health Nutrition, Exercise, Sex Hygiene.

Introduction

Islam is , according to it's followers, the religion of all times and places. It is a perfect system of temporal values. By practicing its laws Muslims all over the world not only attain spirituality but the pinnacle of all other glories and gain the wealth of health. There is a great inter-relationship between modern medicine and some of our Islamic teachings. Every word of Qur'an is in fact an experience of great reality and science is just an effort made towards this reality. Knowledge is limitless and its horizons are constantly expanding with every strike of progress disclosing fresh in formations and according to Qur'an knowledge is a comprehensive text and it involves all branches of science, religion, technology, agriculture, engineering and medicine. It is definitely a miracle of religion that it expands on all branches of human knowledge. This is known from the following quotation from Qur'an: *"We have revealed to you the Scripture so that it might be a clear evidence for everything."*

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Qur'ān has not specified the medicine directly for specific diseases provided the possibility of varied and multiple diseases breaking out in different times at different places. However, the Qur'ān guides humankind medically, by laying out some general and universal rulings of medical importance. Islam preferred naturopathy as long as it solved the problem. The popular saying that prevention is better than cure, which is a fundamental principal of modern medical science, Islam encourages prevention and warns the people against the disadvantages of excessive use of medicine, and warns against the excessive use of medicine even for small issues as this is evident from the following tradition of Prophet that *“one should not treat himself medically for small, simple disorders in health, because sometimes medicines do leave behind disease.”* (Ali, 2001, p.17)

Some of the preventive measures prescribed in Islam are as:

i. Purity

Islam lays great stress on maintaining health, hygiene, cleanliness, beauty and brightness of the body and incorporates all protective and healthful measures in the mundane life via the duties it imposes on believers. It is mandatory to have bodily cleanliness for prayer (*Ṣalāh*). The following statement from Qur'ān clearly indicates the importance of cleanliness:

“O you who believe! When you prepare for prayer, wash your face, and your hands (and arms) to the elbows: rub your head (with water); and wash your feet to the ankles. If you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, bathe your whole body. (Al-Qur'an, 5:6), “You never stand forth therein. There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety, it is more worth of the standing forth for prayer therein. In it are men who love to be purified, and Allah loves those who makes themselves pure.” (Al-Qur'an, 9:180) “Whoever purifies himself does so for the benefit of his own soul.” (Al-Qur'an, 35:18)

Islam promotes both physical and spiritual purity. Five times praying will make a person spiritually clean, and for the prayers the *Tahārah* (cleanliness) is mandatory which a person can attain the physical cleanliness. The Prophet recommends the believers to bath, at least once a week, and perform whole body wash before going to Friday prayers, as He said, *“Having whole body wash on Friday is a duty on all of those who have reached puberty. So is brushing their teeth and using pleasant scents (‘Iṭr).”* (Bukhari, 1976, Kitab al Jum'a)

Every week, on Friday, the Muslims are obliged to observe the prayers with a grand congregation and the Prophet also instructed the believers to use good perfume and perform bath. These instructions of the Prophet emphasizes the purity of the society depends upon the cleanliness of individuals. Cleanliness of societies depends greatly upon hygiene of the individual members. Thus, Islam gives great importance to cleanliness, as many traditions of the Prophet depict his instructions regarding the importance of the purity/cleanliness of individuals as well as their environment. Some of the sayings of the Prophet are as: *“Key of Paradise is Prayer and the Key to Prayer is cleanliness (ablution.)* (Umari, 1980, H.No.294). *“Cleanliness is necessary and important part of faith.”* (Hajjaj, 2003, Kitab al-Tahara). *“If I do not have reservation, and terms of creating problems for my community, I would command brushing one’s teeth before each prayer.”* (Bukhari, 1976, Kitab al-Jum’a), By brushing the teeth a man will not only protect his teeth and mouth, but also will please Allah, as the Messenger of Allah said, *“Cleaning the teeth purifies the mouth and pleases Allah.”*. (Nasa’i, 2007, Kitab al-taharah) The mouth is one of the routes through which diseases enter the body. Therefore, cleanliness of the mouth and teeth is very important in preventing diseases and protecting health. Islam also attaches the importance to the cleanliness of clothes, as Allah orders us in *Sūrah al –Muddaththir* *“And thy garments keep free from stain.”* (Al-Quran, 74:4)

ii. Healthy Nutrition

Healthy nutrition is of prime significance in Islamic teachings. Adequate and balanced nutrition is a preventive measure to ensure protection of health. The Qur’ān illustrates this point as, *“eat and drink: but do not waste by excess, for Allah does not love the wasters.”* (Al-Qur’an, 7:31) In this verse, Allah orders for consuming the permissible things and abandon the wastefulness and usage of forbidden things and means of achieving them.

Focusing particularly on the significance of honey in nutrition and treatment, the Qur’ān points towards the essential food types at number of places. The nutrients mentioned in the Qur’ān contain the protein, carbohydrates and oils necessary for human health. The Qur’ān also points out these nutrients to show people the necessity of consuming them.

The science of nutrition has acquired great importance in modern times. Islam, has already its importance by segregating food items into *halal* and *haram* and has declared haram such food-stuffs which are harmful to the health, like the flesh of swine, dead animals,

blood, wine, narcotics etc; on the other hand Islam has recommended the usage of all useful drinkables and eatables for man including protein-rich meat, fish, egg, honey, date and all other nutritious food stuffs. At the same time, it prohibits from over eating or eating without hunger, for eating more than the requirement of the body adversely affects the digestive system. It also produces surplus calories in the body, which in addition leads to obesity and leads to pre-mature ageing. In order to save man from the ailment of over eating the Prophet ordains moderation in eating as, “*Man is wont to full his stomach in the worst manner.*” (Vinsinik, 1936, p.249)

iii. Diet as a Part of the Cure

Remedies of physical diseases fall in two categories. Among them one depends on instinct, which all species have, there is no need for the medical evaluation to cure this type of illness, which is responsible for hunger, thirst, and fatigue. (Jawzi, 2003, p.20). The statement indicates, disease caused by hunger or thirst, have no need of doctor and can be cured after giving a proper diet. When a patient observes a certain diet, the power contained in the body will co-operate and collaborate towards ridding the body of the ailment. (Jawzi, 2003, p.97). Allah says in the Qur’ān: “*If you are ill, or on journey, or one of you comes from offices of nature or you have been in contact with women, and you find no water, then take for yourself clean sand or earth, and rub these with your face and hands.*” (Al-Qur’an, 4:43)

According to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, The strictest cleanliness and purity of mind and body are required, especially at the time of prayer. But there are circumstances when water for ablutions is not easily obtainable, especially in the dry conditions, and then wash with dry sand or clean earth is recommended. Four such circumstances are mentioned: the two last when washing is specially required; the two first when washing may be necessary, but it may not be easy to get water. For a man, when he is ill, cannot walk out far to get water, and a man on journey has no full control over his supplies. In all four cases, were water cannot be procured, cleaning with dry sand or dry earth is recommended. This is called *Tayammum*. (Ali, 2002, p.224)

A sick person can avoid the use of water when there is a chance of harm in it and instead he may use clean earth to perform his ablution for *Ṣalāh*. This spares his body from the repercussions of using water while ill. This verse sets the precedent for every type of

precautionary or preventive measure (diet etc.) that protects the body from harmful substances that one consumes.

The Prophet sometimes himself stopped his Companions from eating certain things in their illness and ordered them to eat a specific type of food, as there is a tradition narrated by Ibn Maja on the authority of Al-Mundhir bin al-Qays, he said that: *“The Messenger came along with Ḥaḍrat ‘Alī who was then recovering from an illness. At that time, we had some hanging clusters of date. The Messenger of Allah started eating from them, Ḥaḍrat ‘Alī joined him. The Prophet of Allah kept saying to Ḥaḍrat ‘Alī, you are still recovering, until Ḥaḍrat ‘Alī stopped eating. I then made some barley and chards (similar to spinach) and brought it to them. The Prophet said to Ḥaḍrat ‘Alī, “eat from this food, it is more beneficial for you.”* (Majah, 2007, Kitab al-tibb)

The famous statement that *“diet is the top medicine and stomach is the home of diseases, give each person what he is used to (of food and medicine).”* According to Ibn Qayyam it is the sayings of Al-Ḥārith bin Kalādah, the renowned Arab doctor. (Jawzi, 2003, p.98) In his famous statement Al-Ḥārith stated that *“Diet is the best medicine”* and in this statement he also said give each person what he needs. Which means that there are two type of illness, one can be cured by diet and some illness cannot be cured without the medicine that is what Al-Ḥārith said, *“give each person what he needs”* (diet or medicine)?

The Prophet also instructs his followers to give a sick person what he tastes for and don't give a patient what he has not taste for, as in one of the tradition narrated by Ibn-‘Abbās,: *“once, the Prophet visited a sick person and asked him “what do you have taste for? “the man said, “ I have a taste for wheat bread or I have a taste for cake.” The Prophet then said, “Whoever has wheat bread, let him send some of his brother. He also said, ‘when your sick have a taste for something, give them some of it.”* (Majah, 2007, Kitab al-tibb)

In this tradition, the Prophet ordered his followers that if a sick person has taste for anything while he is hungry, provide him that, because it will be less harmful than what he does not have a taste for. So eating what one does not like will cause harm to the patient even if the substance might be beneficial in itself. In general, the type of food that the person likes will be accepted by the body and will be digested in the best way, especially when the appetite for it is strong.

iv. Exercise

Islamic teachings seek, among innumerable spiritual and temporal benefits, to improve the physical fitness of man through various ordinances like observing prayers five times a day.

The real purpose of prayers is to worship Allah, yet there are a number of additional benefits also as, *Ṣalāh* (Prayer) is of great help in maintaining our physical health. Eating two or three times daily needs exercise to decrease the cholesterol level in the body which increases in blood after taking meals, thickens blood and leads to the deposition of slit in the arteries. Five times prayer keeps our body active, helps in digestion, saves from diseases, helps in decreasing cholesterol level in blood, maintains circulation of blood and also mitigates the bad effects of cholesterol. (Qadiri, 2011, p.78)

So exercise will help in decreasing cholesterol level and the circulation of this will play a major role in decreasing the danger of heart attack and protects from some other diseases like, paralysis, diabetes, etc. Islam encouraged physical exercises like, swimming, horse riding, journeys, etc. while idleness, over eating, indulgence in luxuries etc. have been discouraged and the things harmful to health, have been disliked.

v. Sex Hygiene

Sexual intercourse is meant to achieve three essential goals: Firstly, reproduction and preservation of mankind, secondly, expelling the water (semen) which would cause harm if it remains inside the body. Lastly, satisfying sexual desire and enjoying sex and the bounty that it represents. (Jawzi, 2003, p.222)

Islam has discussed all the three essential goals, first, the preservation of mankind. The whole of humanity owes its origin from a single pair i.e. Adam and Eva, through their intercourse, as Allah says in the Qur'ān: *“O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered like seeds) countless men and women.”* (Al-Quran, 4:1)

The second aim of sexual intercourse is to ejaculate the water (sperm) from the body of a male. Because if a person will not ejaculate the sperm it will produce harmful effects. So, this is the medical aspect of sexual intercourse as Muḥammad bin Zakariyya (the famous medical scientist) said, whoever ignores sex for a long time, his nerves will weaken, their flow will be blocked and his penis will shrink. I have seen some people who do not have sex

claiming to observe some kind of abstinence and their bodies become colder, their movement restricted and unexplainable depression touches them. Further, their appetite and digestive powers also decreased. (Jawzi, 2003, p.222f)

The third and the final essential aim is pleasure. As a person after a day's hard work feels too much weary, he then enjoys this natural bounty through legal means that satisfies his mind as well as body and gets relaxed. Allah says in the Qur'an: *"It is He who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)."* (Al-Quran, 7:189). These words indicate that the sexual intercourse give pleasure and passion to both male as well as female and thus, relieve them from various anxieties and pressures. As the Prophet of Allah is reported to have said, *"The life of this world is enjoyment, and the best enjoyment is righteous wife."* (Hajjaj, 2003, Fosterage). However, Islam has strictly prohibited some malpractices like anal sex, sex during menstruation and other harmful, unusual and unnatural means of having sexual pleasure. Likewise, Islam has also prohibited fornication and adultery.

Conclusion

Two of the topics that Qur'an emphasizes and sometimes gives information about are medicine and preventive medicine. Islam states that health is a great blessing and asks all believers through duties imposed on them to take necessary preventive measures to protect their health. Islam attaches such a high amount of importance to protecting our health that it recommends us to avoid any behavior that could give harm to our health even if they are intended as worship. God allowed travelers and sick people to perform their fasts at a later time, to have cleansing with sand instead of washing the whole body in case of a medical necessity. The Qur'an orders believers to take all preventive measures and the causes of which cannot be grasped. But diseases may also develop because of the faults we have in protecting our health in the way required by religion. Anyone who becomes ill because of not protecting his health is undoubtedly a sinner. However, those diseases which emerge as a testing of faith or those that develop because of the individual's fault do not necessarily have something evil. Qur'an's provisions are not only regarding preventive medicine but also on other topics aiming at protecting human health and humankind. Because Qur'an is addressed to human beings, therefore it asks all individuals to protect themselves against all kinds of physical and mental diseases.

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