

# Fit for Hajj

**DR SALIM PARKER**

Hajj is the ultimate journey in the life of any Muslim. To stand on the plain of Arafah, reaching out to your Creator at the time Allah forgives more of his subjects than at any other time is truly what every believer strives for.

One of the requirements of undertaking the journey is physical and mental health. Hajj is a time when all hujaaj want to be at their optimal spiritual, physical, medical and mental faculties. The appreciation of the journey is immensely enhanced when physical fitness is at its peak.

The reality of Hajj tends to be different. More than a third of pilgrims are over the age of 60, with most of them suffering from medical conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, heart and respiratory conditions and arthritis.

Nearly half of all pilgrims walk about five kilometres a day over the five days of Hajj. This is done in temperatures that approach 50 degrees Celsius with high humidity, leading to conditions that approach dangerous levels.

If the fact that nearly 70 per cent of pilgrims drink less than two litres of water a day is added



Shaikh Irfaan Abrahams, president of the MJC, accompanied the Fit for Hajj participants on one of the walks.

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to the above facts, it becomes evident that heat afflictions, injuries and other medical conditions pose serious risks to a significant percentage of our hujaaj.

Numerous scientific studies have proven the benefits of exercise on health. Walking is one exercise that has a significant impact on overall general health, and spe-



At the end of the Fit for Hajj programme, participants took part in the Itheko Slave Route Challenge.

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cific positive outcomes on cardiac, respiratory, musculoskeletal and mental aspects.

With this in mind, Dr Nasir Jaffer, a sports physician, formulated the argument that by improving the physical health of hujaaj by walking, it will vastly improve their ability to cope with the vigorous physical and psychological demands of the journey.

Brimstone Itheko Sport Athletic Club, which is based in Rondebosch, had a similar initiative a few years ago and was approached. The club's president, Achmat Jacobs, and the head coach, Farouk Meyer, were extremely supportive of the idea and, with the input of other coaches, a 12-week, supervised, structured programme was developed. The Fit for Hajj project was born.

Pilgrims were recruited at the Sahuc road show and the number was limited to about 100 for this pilot project. The fitness of the participants was initially assessed and they were taken on increasingly more strenuous walks every Saturday afternoon over a 12-week period.

In addition, they had to undertake one or two unsupervised walks during the week, which had to be logged. Since this is a scientific study done in collaboration with University of KwaZulu-Natal, the regular attendance of all was essential.

The enthusiasm, commitment and camaraderie of the hujaaj were the greatest inspiration to the medical and coaching personnel. Their dedication was so infectious that one of the coaches, Sulaiman Moerat, ran a race on the West Coast in the morning and was back that same afternoon for his

coaching duties!

The commitment of Fatima Van De Rheede, Wazeer Bassadien, Reyadh Jacobs, Malika Meyer, Isgaak Slamdien, Yagyah Francis, Haniyah Jacobs, Soraya Manie, Thaabit Hendricks and Sulaiman (as well as his wife Layla) Moerat was way above anything that could be expected from them, and the participants will always be deeply grateful to them.

Keeping the project together by doing all the administration and being in contact with everyone involved is the amazingly dedicated Atieyah Rasdien. Rondebosch Medical Centre graciously provided medical cover for the entire duration of the programme.

The participants then surprised everyone by holding a surprise function for all involved, which was deeply appreciated. The final walk, after another fitness assessment to gauge their improvement, was done at the end of the 12 weeks. This was the Itheko Slave Route Challenge that was held on May 13.

The Fit for Hajj participants, by now bonded as a family, had t-shirts, caps and hydration packs donated by Brimstone Itheko Sport Athletic Club. All their gear was branded with their unique logo.

The participants are undertaking a lower intensity walking programme during Ramadaan to maintain their acquired level of fitness. They will all be assessed on return from Hajj and it is expected that they would have fewer infections, fewer injuries and fewer other medical and psychological afflictions compared to previously documented studies.

The concept was presented at a medical meeting in Porto, Portugal, by Dr Salim Parker where it was received with enthusiasm. If successful, it is hoped to expand this community to incorporate other centres. Ultimately, a programme for the community called 'Fit for Health' is envisaged.



Itheko's medical members volunteered their time to do medical assessment of the Fit for Hajj participants.

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