



From cravings to clarity

A nutritionist's guide to eating like your body deserves

Salty fact: Malaysians are consuming 7.5 grams of salt per day, exceeding the 5 grams recommendation. A staggering number of three out of four adults are consuming a diet high in salt. A diet high in salt reflects that dependency on processed and out-of-home meals is on the rise. Packaged foods are higher in salt due to preservation and taste factors. Eating out increases salt intake. Salt is an essential aspect of food preparation as it's a flavour enhancer. Takeaway foods, restaurants and processed foods relied heavily on salt to ensure consumer preference and satisfaction.



MALAYSIANS are facing an epidemic of obesity, according to the latest survey by the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS), as one in two Malaysian adults is either overweight or obese. This is an alarming trend as it leads to an unhealthy nation at risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. The implication is concerning as it may lead to the creation of less healthy generations.

What are the common nutritional mistakes that Malaysians are making? Let's explore some of them.



eating becoming a norm, where eating is often accompanied by social events, even when not required. Adults would develop cravings, leading to overconsumption of food. In addition, metabolism is lower during late hours and the body tends to burn fewer calories. Since movement is less at night, the body also burns fewer calories. Consequently, excess calories consumed are stored as fat. As evidenced by numerous past research studies, foods high in refined carbohydrates are often preferred as a choice for supper.



What can be done to improve Malaysian nutritional health status?

- Encourage fruit and vegetable consumption by packing them for school or work daily. This can be supplemented when eating away from home to improve nutrient intake.
- Reducing screen time before bedtime can help ensure good sleep quality and prevent late-night snacking.
- Having regular meals daily at around the same time. This will develop a healthy habit of consuming meals on time, mainly breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dinner should be planned at least 2 hours before bedtime.
- Focus on a nutrient-dense breakfast to provide essential nutrients for the body to kick-start the day.
- Consume plain water with main meals and reduce consumption of beverages, including caffeinated types.
- Eat more fresh foods and choose low-salt foods.
- Wholesome dinner: A satiating dinner that is well-balanced with varied options of food groups will help prevent snacking later in the night.



Skipping breakfast: Breakfast skipping is rampant, especially among young adults and adolescents. Is this a worrying trend? Yes, it is based on nutrition studies, which is the start of many health problems in the future. Why is breakfast important to us? This is the first meal that provides the body with energy after an overnight fast. It helps in improving focus and attention, especially for school-going children and young adults. Breakfast consumption also helps in weight management by regulating appetite and preventing overeating throughout the day. A consistent breakfast eating habit has been proven to provide positive health outcomes such as balanced blood glucose regulation, good metabolic health and improved nutrient intake. The significance of breakfast in regulating our daily food intake should not be overlooked, as it serves as a crucial foundation for establishing a healthy and balanced diet.

Late-night eating: According to the latest NHMS 2024, two in five adolescents and one in three adults have both a heavy supper and late-night meals at least once a week. Late-night eating has been proven to worsen sleep quality, disrupting metabolism and influencing gut health. Modern lifestyle has led to social



Sugary treats and drinks: Consumption of sugar is increasing over the years, mainly attributed to hidden sugar that can be found in most foods and beverages. One in seven adults consumes 7.5 teaspoons of sugar per day, exceeding the recommended six teaspoons/day. Half of this consumption comes from beverages alone. By reducing sugary beverage consumption during meals, including caffeinated drinks, a reduction in sugar intake can be achieved. One key recommendation to reduce sugar intake is to reduce beverage consumption. Iced Milo, *teh tarik* and bubble tea contribute significantly to hidden sugar intake.

In addition to improving Malaysian eating habits, it is crucial to maintain mental clarity and take breaks amidst hectic schedules. Sleep hygiene is essential, as both quality and adequate sleep enable us to reset and have sufficient energy for our routines. This is particularly vital among young working adults residing in urban environments.

Eat smart, live well: 5 simple wins this week

- 1. Try a new local fruit or vegetable:** Swap your usual for something different — *ciku*, starfruit (*belimbing*) or *pucuk manis* to diversify your nutrient intake.
- 2. Make one home-cooked meal a social event:** Gather family or housemates to cook together once this week – it encourages mindful eating and connection.
- 3. Go drink-free during lunch:** Skip all drinks during your midday meal once or twice this week. Hydrate before and after instead – it helps you notice fullness cues.
- 4. Plan your meals on Sunday night:** Even if only loosely. Knowing what you'll eat from Monday to Wednesday helps reduce impulsive snacking or ordering in.
- 5. Sleep by 10pm, three nights this week:** Prioritise rest – your metabolism, hormones and appetite cues depend on it more than you realise.



Contributed by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM)

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