

# Enjoying local favourites without **the guilt**

BY DR MOHD SHAH KAMARUDIN

“It’s not about being flawless; it’s about being consistent and balanced.”



**F**OR Malaysians, food is more than just nourishment. It is culture, comfort, celebration and identity. From the rich aroma of *nasi lemak* in the morning to the sizzling sound of *char kuey teow* at hawker stalls and the indulgence of *rendang* and *kuih* during festive seasons, food is deeply woven into the fabric of daily life. But along with this love of food, there is also a growing worry about health problems like diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. This makes many people think that enjoying local favourites comes with a cost: Guilt.

You do not have to give up your favourite Malaysian foods to be healthy, though. Eating healthy does not mean following stringent rules or eating bland foods. It means making wise decisions, eating in moderation and finding a balance between pleasure and nutrition. You can eat well and live well if you make a few small changes.

People often think that they have to stop eating traditional meals like *nasi lemak*, *roti canai*, *rendang* or *kuih*. But no food is terrible in and of itself. How often you eat it, how much you eat and how it fits into your entire diet are more important. For example, a small plate of *nasi lemak* with a cooked egg, cucumber slices and sambal in moderation can still be a healthy meal. When you eat the dish with deep-fried chicken, a lot of sambal

cooked in oil and a sweet drink like *teh tarik*, that is when the problem starts. In these combinations, the amount of calories, saturated fat and sodium can easily exceed the recommended daily intake.

When eating out, which many working Malaysians do, it is extremely important to make healthy selections. Hawker food is readily available and tastes good, but it is generally high in fat, salt and sugar. That being said, you can still enjoy your meals by making modest but important alterations. You can ask for less oil and extra vegetables when you order *char kuey teow*, for example. Instead of the customary *nasi campur* with two or three rich dishes, consider grilled or steamed proteins as an alternative. Ask for the gravy to be served on the side and fill half your plate with vegetables. You may also make soupy noodle dishes healthier by using clear broths instead of creamy or greasy ones and adding tofu, eggs and leafy greens to the bowl.

Cooking at home gives you even more opportunities to eat healthily while preserving the flavours of classic foods. You can elevate many classic Malaysian recipes with just a few minor tweaks. You can reduce the saturated fat in curries by using less coconut milk or replacing it with low-fat milk. You may also make your meals healthier by steaming, boiling or grilling your meats instead of frying them.



Adding vegetables to meat recipes not only increases fibre but also makes the dish more filling.



Refreshing plain water with lemon and mint as a smart alternative to sweet drinks.

**“Cooking at home gives you more chances to eat healthy while keeping the taste of classic foods.”**

drinking more plain water and reducing the amount of energy-dense food you consume. Even simple modifications can result in long-term health benefits, such as switching from a sugary drink to water or eating a smaller portion of a rich dish.

You do not have to give up your gastronomic heritage or feel guilty about enjoying a traditional meal. It simply means knowing what your body requires, being conscious of what you eat and not exceeding your limits. So the next time you eat your beloved plate of *nasi lemak* or festive *kuih*, do so with gratitude and awareness. You can definitely eat well and live well if you do it the correct way. For more guidance on healthy local eating, consult a registered nutritionist.



Contributed by:  
Dr Mohd Shah Kamarudin,  
MAHPC (NUTR) 00464  
Council Member, Nutrition Society of  
Malaysia

Adding vegetables to meat recipes not only increases fibre but also makes the dish more filling. For example, you can make *ayam masak merah* with less oil and more tomatoes, onions and carrots without changing the taste. You can even make festive foods like *rendang* with lean cuts of meat and less oil, using only traditional spices and herbs to provide flavour.

While ordinary meals can be adjusted to improve health, special-occasion delights such as *lemang*, *dodol*, *kek lapis* and *kuih raya* do not have to be avoided totally. These are “sometimes foods,” which means you should consume them in moderation and with caution. Instead

of eliminating them, pay attention to how much and how often you eat them. Rather than trying everything on the menu, pick a couple of your favourites. Eat small amounts, take your time and enjoy every bite. This conscious way of thinking helps you avoid overeating and lets you enjoy the experience without guilt.

People often overlook the amount of sugar in the drinks they consume. Sweetened beverages significantly contribute to daily sugar intake and are usually consumed without conscious thought. A single glass of *teh tarik* can contain as much as six teaspoons of sugar and canned drinks or boxed juices may have

considerably more. These extra sugars can add up quickly and make you more likely to gain weight and develop long-term health problems. Plain water is always the best choice, but you may add lemon slices, mint or cucumber to your water to make it taste better. It is best to choose tea or coffee that is unsweetened or has a lower sugar content. If you enjoy milk, opt for low-fat or unsweetened options.

Ultimately, eating well is not about being flawless; it is about being consistent and balanced. It is about making better decisions most of the time, but still having fun. Instead of worrying about what to cut out, start by eating more vegetables,

## Why meals taste better together

IN Malaysia, food is rarely just about what is on the plate. It is about who is sitting across the table. From late-night chats at the stall to strolling through a bustling night market, eating is one of the simplest yet most powerful ways Malaysians connect with one another.

Sharing a meal naturally slows down the pace of eating. When conversations stretch across the table, portions last longer and plates are savoured rather than rushed. This unhurried rhythm not only aids digestion but also encourages moderation, a hidden health benefit that comes with social dining.

The communal style of eating also creates variety. At family gatherings, a spread of dishes means everyone gets to sample small portions of many flavours instead of loading up on just one. It is a balance that mirrors the “little of everything” principal

nutritionists often recommend.

Beyond the physical, meals together nourish emotional well-being. Sitting with friends after work over a plate of fried rice or catching up with relatives during festive feasts offers comfort that goes beyond calories. Studies show that people who eat socially often report lower stress levels and a stronger sense of belonging.

Even in today’s fast-paced world of food delivery apps and takeaway culture, the tradition of eating together remains a cornerstone of Malaysian life. It is proof that health does not come only from counting nutrients but also from laughter shared, stories exchanged and bonds strengthened over the table.

So the next time you head out for a drink with friends or gather for a family dinner, remember that what makes the meal wholesome is not just the food – it is the company.

