



Knowing how to eat does not always mean eating the right foods."

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Malaysia's nutrition wake up call

Half the country struggles with diet, here is why expert guidance matters

BY ASSOC PROF DR WONG JYH EIIN & PROF DR MAHENDERAN APPUKUTTY

In a world where food is everywhere and everyone has an opinion on what is "healthy", it is easy to think we have got it all figured out. After all, we eat every day. How hard can it be?

Our latest National Health and Morbidity Survey tells a different story - that knowing how to eat does not always mean eating the right foods.

Today, more than half of Malaysian adults are either overweight (34%) or obese (22%) or have a big belly - abdominal obesity (60%), which increases the risk of diabetes, heart diseases and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Children and adolescents (5-17 years) face a dual burden of malnutrition,

whereby nearly 1 in 3 school-aged children are overweight or obese, while some are still suffering from stunting and thinness.

When we examine the dietary patterns closely, only 5% of adults are eating the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables daily, while consuming excessive amounts of salt and drinking too many sugar-containing beverages.

The alarming truth is that Malaysians continue to be plagued by poor nutritional status. It becomes abundantly clear that unhealthy diets and lifestyles are the leading cause behind this escalating health crisis. We have too much weight but too little nutrition.

Relevance of nutritionists in today's world

Let's face it. Most people would not hesitate to see a doctor when they are sick. However, when it comes to food, many people rely on social media tips, hearsay or advice from untrained individuals. The truth is, our nutritional needs change throughout life and knowing how to eat well at each stage is just as important as treating illness. For example, pregnant and breastfeeding women need the proper nutrients to support themselves and their babies. Infants and children require balanced diets for healthy growth and brain development. Active individuals and athletes rely on personalised nutrition to enhance performance and recovery. Not forgetting, older adults need to eat well to maintain muscle strength, support their immune system and preserve their quality of life.



Nutritionists help individuals make informed food choices at every stage of life, from childhood to healthy ageing.

Who are nutritionists?

If you have ever searched online, you might have come across claims like “anyone can call themselves a nutritionist” or that “no qualifications are needed to use the title.” While that may be true in some countries, where the title is not always regulated, it is a common misconception when applied to Malaysia.

Here’s a pro tip: Context matters. In this case, Malaysia is ahead of many countries in safeguarding and regulating the nutrition profession. It is time to update the narrative.

The Malaysian Allied Health Profession Act (Act 774) was drafted in 2008, gazetted on 18 February 2016 and enforced on 1 July 2020. Under the Act 774, “Nutritionist” is officially recognised as one of 16 allied health professions. This means that only individuals with a Bachelor’s degree in the field of Nutrition or equivalent, as recognised by the Malaysian Allied Health Professions Council (MAHPC), are eligible to be a registered nutritionist. Registered nutritionists are issued an official MAHPC (NUTR) registration number, a mark of their professional qualification, competency and credibility.



Your health deserves more than guesswork – seek advice from a nutritionist.”

Appukutty

Nutritionists are trained, regulated healthcare professionals in Malaysia

Nutritionists are qualified professionals who specialise in the science of nutrition and its application to promote the well-being of individuals and populations, preventing disease and supporting the management of diet-related diseases. They help people make informed choices to stay healthy, prevent disease and improve quality of life, whether it is supporting nutrition during pregnancy and childhood, enhancing athletic performance, or promoting healthy ageing. Beyond individual care, nutritionists play a vital role in promoting public health nutrition by leading nutrition campaigns in schools, communities and workplaces. They are at the frontline of preventing diet-related NCDs. Nutritionists also collaborate with medical doctors, dietitians and other healthcare professionals to prevent individuals from developing nutrition-related conditions, playing a key role in prevention and early intervention before issues become severe and making them an essential part of the healthcare system.

Where do you find a nutritionist?

Today, you can find registered nutritionists in most Klinik Kesihatan (government health clinics) across the country, where they provide evidence-based nutrition guidance as part of Malaysia’s public healthcare system. But their contributions extend far beyond government settings.

Nutritionists in Malaysia are actively involved in academia and research, shaping the next generation of professionals

and contributing to the advancement of scientific knowledge. Many work in corporate wellness programmes, helping employees stay healthy and productive. Others play a vital role in media and communications, translating complex nutrition science into messages the public can understand. You will also find them in non-profit organisations, working on food security and community nutrition initiatives, or operating as independent consultants and freelance practitioners in the private sector.

In recognition of their essential role, 4 September 2025 marked the inaugural celebration of Malaysian Nutritionists’ Day. This special occasion shines a spotlight on the profession and honours the critical role nutritionists play in promoting public health, preventing disease and improving lives through evidence-based nutrition advice.

The next time you seek trustworthy nutrition information, be sure to consult a registered dietitian or nutritionist. They are qualified, regulated and making a difference in more places than you might think.

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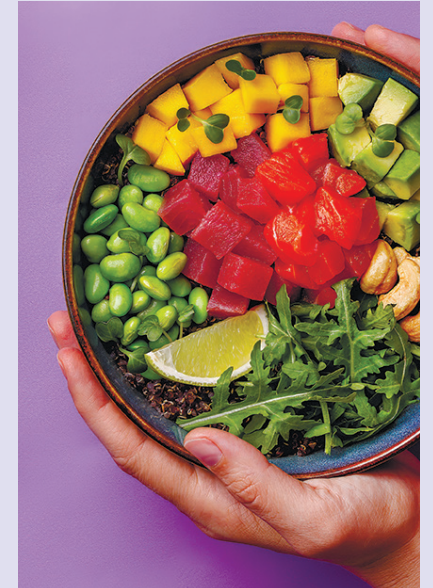
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**Eating right in a world full of food noise**

IN today’s hyper-connected world, nutrition advice is everywhere – from viral videos to self-proclaimed wellness coaches promising miracle fixes. The challenge is not a lack of information, but an overwhelming flood of mixed messages. One minute, carbohydrates are the enemy, the next, they are the body’s fuel. Superfoods rise and fall in popularity almost weekly, while “detox teas” and trendy diets continue to dominate timelines.

This constant noise has left many people confused, unsure of what to believe or who to trust. The result? Decision fatigue – a state where making healthy choices feels exhausting, even impossible. When confusion takes over, we often default to convenience, grabbing fast food or processed snacks instead of thoughtful, balanced meals.

So, how do we cut through the clutter? A good starting point is learning to question the source of your nutrition advice. Does credible science back it? Do health authorities endorse it or is it just an influencer with a large following? Reliable information usually points towards balance, variety and moderation rather than extreme restrictions or “quick fixes”.

Another strategy is to focus on building small, sustainable habits. Something as simple as drinking more plain water, swapping one sugary drink a day or adding an extra serving of vegetables to dinner can make a lasting difference.

While nutritionists and dietitians remain the most reliable sources of guidance, everyone can benefit from practising food literacy. That means understanding labels, recognising hidden sugars and salts, and being able to spot misleading marketing.

In a world filled with loud opinions on food, quiet clarity is what matters most. Choosing progress over perfection, questioning fads and listening to your body are the first steps to eating well for life.



From clinics to classrooms, nutritionists are working to improve public health through food and nutrition education.