



Deadly diets

A major study found that one in five deaths worldwide in 2017 was linked to a poor diet such as eating too much sodium and not enough whole grains and fruit. How can we eat better? Joyce Teo finds out. D2

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Are you eating your way to an early death?



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More than half of diet-related deaths in 2017 were associated with eating too much sodium and too little whole grains and fruit, according to a global study



Joyce Teo

A major global study, which recently found that one in five deaths around the world in 2017 was associated with poor diet, showed that Singapore had the 12th-lowest rate of diet-related deaths among 195 countries. It is perhaps proof that Singaporeans are increasingly aware of the benefits of eating healthy, but as with the rest of the world, many do not eat enough healthy foods, but consume too much sodium and other unhealthy foods, experts say. The Global Burden Of Disease study that was published in the medical journal, The Lancet, earlier this month, found that more than half of diet-related deaths were associated with eating too much sodium and too little whole grains and fruit.

Eating too little vegetables, as well as insufficient amounts of nuts and seeds or Omega-3 fatty acids, were also harmful. Cardiovascular disease was the leading cause of diet-related deaths, claiming 10 million out of 11 million such deaths in 2017. This was followed by cancer and type 2 diabetes. Professor Dimitrios Spanos, programme director and assistant professor in the health and social sciences cluster at the Singapore Institute of Technology, said the study findings show that "our diet should be rich in whole grain, fruit and vegetables, and we should consume less salt to reduce our risk of cancer, diabetes or heart disease and their associated complications". Out of the 195 countries surveyed

in the study, the countries with the lowest rates of diet-related deaths in 2017 were Israel, France, Spain, Japan and Andorra.

With the exception of Israel, the other four countries also ranked in the top 10 countries with the lowest rates of such deaths in 1990.

In 2017, Singapore recorded 112.5 diet-related fatalities per 100,000 deaths.

South Korea ranked seventh (104.3 deaths), the United States ranked 43rd (171 deaths), India ranked 118th (310 deaths) and China ranked 140th (350 deaths).

The countries with the highest rates of diet-related deaths in 2017 were Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

Poor diet killed more people than smoking or high blood pressure, the study found.

It also found that the largest shortfalls in global consumption were seen for foods such as nuts, seeds, whole grains and milk, while sugary drinks, processed meat and sodium were being overateen.

"In general, those countries (with the lowest rates of diet-related deaths) had largely healthy plant-based diets," the study's co-author Walter Willett, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, told The Straits Times.

"The Mediterranean diet provides the best studied example, but it is possible to put together a similarly healthy diet with foods from Asia, Latin America or Africa."

He added that no country was close to achieving an optimal diet.

In Singapore, the latest National Nutrition Survey last year showed

there was a rise in the consumption of whole grains, fruit and vegetables.

The findings, however, recorded that 90 per cent of Singaporeans consume about 9g of salt daily, exceeding the recommended amount of about 5g.

High salt consumption raises blood pressure, which, in turn, thickens blood vessel walls and significantly raises the risk of heart diseases and stroke - which cause one out of three deaths in Singapore.

Prof Spanos, who has a PhD in human nutrition, said there is a need to shift the focus of policies at the national and international levels.

Currently, most policies target the restriction of the intake of nutrients, such as sugar, fat and sodium.

However, based on the new evidence, the focus should include the promotion of eating healthy foods, such as nuts, seeds, fruit, whole grain and fish, as well as the focus on eating less salt.

Indeed, it is not enough to eat only less sodium or processed food.

"No single change or food will bring one to optimal health," said Prof Willett. "I make the analogy using an orchestra: We need all the pieces in place and with the right balance to produce harmony and good health."

CHALLENGES TO EATING WELL

The challenges to improving the diet of Singaporeans may be similar to the obstacles faced by other countries, experts here say.

"For example, the cost of daily consumption of fruit, vegetables and nuts, and the lack of cooking at home can be barriers for some

Singaporeans, who do not recognise the need to increase the proportion of healthy foods and decrease the amount of salt in their meals in order to be healthier," said Prof Spanos.

Ms Lin Wen, a dietitian at National University Hospital, concurred that people tend to consume more sodium when dining out.

The prevalence of curries and sauces (chilli sauce, soya sauce, fish sauce and oyster sauce) in local dishes also contribute to sodium intake.

Furthermore, some food fads here, including salted egg yolk-based dishes, involve high amounts of sodium, she said.

Although Singaporeans may be aware of the benefits of whole grains, white rice remains the main choice of carbohydrate for many.

One reason is that it is more convenient to buy white rice at hawker centres, foodcourts and even restaurants, said Ms Lin.

"Until there is a major shift in the food supply, in which dining establishments offer whole grains as the main carbohydrate, coupled with acceptance from Singaporeans, there will be a lack of whole grains in Singaporeans' diets," she said.

Maintaining a healthy diet can be difficult for some, particularly as many Singaporeans lead sedentary lifestyles and are eating out more often, said Mr Won Tin Chiang, a senior dietitian at Toa Payoh Polyclinic.

Furthermore, Singapore is a food haven. Mr Won said patients at the polyclinic - young and old - often do not have two servings of fruit a day. They also eat too few whole grains and too much sodium, he added.

Not everyone is aware of dietary risks. Mr Won said he has been seeing more pre-diabetic patients in recent years. "They are usually not aware that their higher weight may cause diabetes," he said.

"I will tell them to reduce their calorie intake, exercise and eat a balanced diet. It's not just about cutting the intake of white sugar."

However, there is hope - as getting people here to eat healthy has become less of an uphill task over the years.

"Six or seven years ago, when I asked patients to eat more vegetables and fruit, they would say I am asking them to eat like a cow."

"Today, they are more receptive to advice," Mr Won said.

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Healthy meals, healthy you

The recent Global Burden Of Disease study, which tracked the dietary habits of people in 195 countries, put the spotlight on a diet of those from countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, including France, Greece, Italy and Spain.

The Mediterranean diet advocates for more vegetables, more whole grains, healthier oils, more fish and less red meat, less refined carbohydrates and less salt. It has been shown to be effective in reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Dietitian Dimitrios Spanos, a programme director and assistant professor in the health and social sciences cluster at the Singapore Institute of Technology, said it is not a "diet" per se, but a sustainable way of healthy living that incorporates healthy nutrition and regular physical activity.

Prof Spanos, who has a PhD in human nutrition, said a diet that is rich in antioxidants, fibre and Omega-3 fatty acids, and regular physical activity (20 to 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week), can help to improve one's weight and body mass index, blood pressure, blood glucose and blood lipids.

For those who are keen to incorporate the Mediterranean diet into their Asian diets, he offers the following tips.

Replace palm oil with olive, canola or soya bean oil

The exact choice depends on your cooking method.

Olive oil has a lower smoke point than canola oil and is generally not suitable for frying. It has a strong flavour, so it works better if you are making a sauce.

For other methods of cooking, such as browning and pan-frying (deep-frying is not recommended), sunflower and canola are equally good, he said. Canola oil is also good for stir-frying and oven-cooking.

Include more vegetables

You can add more vegetables to your soups or have a side dish of vegetables, which would allow you to reduce the portion of carbohydrates on your plate. The more vegetables, the better.

"Supplements can help fill some gaps, but almost surely, they will not completely replace real fruit and vegetables," the study's co-author Walter Willett, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, told The Straits Times.

Replace white rice with brown rice

The study showed that the more often one consumes wholegrain products, the better it is for one's health. However, the portion of such products should not exceed one-third of your plate.

Have fish twice a week

Have it boiled or steamed instead of fried.

The following oily fish can be one of the two servings: tuna, salmon, tenggiri batang, mackerel, sardine and ikan tenggiri papan.

The second serving can be a white fish that is also cooked in a healthy way.

Prof Spanos does not consider the ikan bilis in nasi lemak as one of the two recommended servings of fish as it is preserved and salted.

Opt for fruit-based desserts or fruit to end a meal

For a healthy fruit-based dessert, you can add fruit, walnuts and a teaspoon of honey to a serving of low-fat yogurt or have a handful of frozen grapes.

If you are making your own fruit tarts and fruit-based cakes (such as banana cake), reduce the amount of sugar in the recipe by adding more fruit.

Eat more nuts

Add unsalted nuts to your dishes or have them as a snack. For example, you can add walnuts to your salad or have about one handful of almonds as a snack.

Eat less red meat

Limit your red-meat intake to one meal a week and poultry to twice a week. Eat fish twice a week and plant-based proteins, such as nuts, legumes and tofu, on other days.

Replace salt and gravies with more herbs and spices

This depends on the cuisine. Some people may want to add more dried chilli, others more curry powder or more cinnamon, cardamom or star anise.

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