

# Putting the brakes on fast food

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A Health Ministry survey revealed that 28% of Malaysians below the age of 30 ate burgers twice a week. Hence, the proposal to “nip in the bud” the growing fast food culture and to ban fast food advertising in TV programmes targeted at children under 12. Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek shares that Malaysians generally know how to lead a healthy life but resist putting what they know into practice.

By **AUDREY EDWARDS**  
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“YOU are what you eat,” says Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek, citing an oft-quoted line.

The ministry's recent proposal to ban fast food advertisements received substantial coverage in the local media, but little has been said about the reasons for the decision.

The ministry has had second thoughts since then, however, subsequently announcing that the proposal would be revised. The proposed ban is now limited to TV programmes for children under the age of 12.

A total ban on fast food advertising would have a serious impact on other related parties as revenue from it on TV, newspapers and billboards total over RM100mil annually.

“We are discouraging people from eating fast food as part of the healthy lifestyle programme promoted by the Health Ministry. A healthy lifestyle involves eating healthy food, exercising, and not smoking or drinking excessively. When we talk about healthy food, we are talking

about food rich in fibre and nutrients, and without excessive sugar, salt and fat.

“Our definition of fast food is food that is produced in big quantities in a standardised form, and served in outlets that advertises its services,” Dr Chua explains.

Some quarters argue that targeting fast foods exclusively is unfair as there is a vast variety of unhealthy local fare that is even more easily available.

The ministry is aware of this seemingly double standards but, as Dr Chua clarifies, “It is not easy to tell Malaysians not to eat local food. It is part of Malaysian culture to eat local food. But the difference is that there is no advertising by operators of local foods; they do not go on aggressive campaigning like what KFC, McDonald's and Pizza Hut are doing. These fast foods attract the younger generation because of their advertisements.”

According to the minister, a nutritional requirement survey in 2003 carried out by the ministry showed that 28% of Malaysians below the age of 30 ate burgers twice a week. The proposal to ban fast food TV advertisements therefore aims to



**Dr Chua:** ‘We want adults to make a wise choice, and we want the fast food people to help us’

reduce exposure of young children to the fast food culture.

“Unless we nip it in the bud now, it will be so deeply ingrained that Western fast food will become part of our culture.”

He adds that the proposal only attempts to address one of the issues of unhealthy lifestyles and Malaysians need to be educated further on the issue.

“People do not understand what we are doing. They say we are taking a simplistic solution to a complex problem – we say it is only part of the solution.

“We want adults to make a wise choice, and we want the fast food people to help us.”

Dr Chua explains that in addition to the price, fast food outlets now have to display the calorie and fat content of the food. But that alone is insufficient.

“It is just information and not education. While it is true they have everything listed there, people cannot digest the information. It is so complicated and complex that you

## Fast food

Item	Calories	Fat (grams)
Two pieces of fried chicken (one wing, one drumstick)	263	11.7
One small 15cm beef pepperoni pizza	674	40.1
One double patty beef burger with cheese	438	16.8
One hot dog	223	11.5
Six pieces chicken nuggets	346	22.6
One french fries (regular size)	374	20.8
One cup soft drink (orange, regular size)	255	(13 teaspoons sugar)
<b>Total daily RNI (Recommended Nutrient Intake)</b>		
Children (Ages 1-3)	945	26
Children (Ages 4-9)	1,500	42
Youths (Ages 10-18)	2,350	65
Adults (Ages 19- >65)	2,130	59

Source: Health Ministry



need an expert to understand it.”

He says that in addition to the fat and calorie content, the total daily requirement should be listed as well.

“If we publish that a certain product contains 450 calories and at the same place we state that the daily requirement is 1,500, then that is education. Malaysians are aware and quite knowledgeable about how to lead a healthy life, but there is a lot of resistance putting what they know into practice.”

The ministry is now taking matters one step further.

“We have met up with the big companies, and from June this year, they will be able to come up with food that is regarded as a ‘healthy

choice.’ A technical committee has been set up that will come up with a formula as to what constitutes healthy food – which is basically a reduction of sugar, salt and fat. If they are willing to participate, they must apply to qualify for it.”

At the end of the day, changing the eating of habits of Malaysians will be a difficult task.

The ministry can only do so much. Ultimately, the choice of food is up to the individual.

“It has been shown that food that is sweet, salty, fatty tastes best. Adults ultimately have to make a choice of what food they want to eat. We cannot tell them like a nanny,” Dr Chua concludes.