

In the fight against increasing obesity among Malaysians, the Health Ministry has come up with a novel plan for healthy eating in schools.

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LESTER Hiew, a Form Three student at a national school in Klang, has much to say about canteen food.

For years he has been eating half-cooked fried rice, hard noodles, diluted grape juice and fried chicken which has more batter than meat. Sometimes the chicken comes complete with tiny unplucked feathers still sticking to it.

If that is not bad enough, imagine having to find a clean chair to sit on because most of the canteen chairs are speckled with bird droppings.

Over at SMK Subang Utama things look brighter for Jeremy Ong, a Form Two student.

He has more choices — potato wedges, chicken kebab, chicken chop, cheese bread, nuggets, *nasi lemak* and fizzy drinks every time he goes to the canteen. But Ong is not aware that these kinds of food are often laden with fat, salt and sugar. Excessive intake of all three spell health problems (see table).

Associate Professor Poh Bee Koon, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, says some schools provide nutritious food whereas others do

(Don't) pass the salt, please



Cutting down fat and sodium in the preparation of food is a good move

not. Obesity results from excessive intake of calories and a lack of exercise. Reducing one's body weight by five to 10 per cent significantly lowers health risk. Eating healthily means meeting one's daily nutritional requirements, while avoiding the deficiencies and excesses that contribute to the risk of diet-related diseases. This involves healthy eating and practising good food hygiene.

It is therefore timely that the Health Ministry is planning a pilot project to promote healthy eating and combat obesity in Penang, Malacca, Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur. Sixteen schools will serve canteen food with less sugar, fat and salt beginning June. Guidelines for

canteen operators are being drawn up for preparing suitable and healthy food for pupils.

The project's first phase will start in four primary schools in each of the four areas. It will be expanded to other schools if response is good.

The project is one of the strategies to be implemented in the ministry's National Plan of Action for Nutrition, a 10-year action plan that ends in 2015 to promote and improve Malaysian nutritional and lifestyle practices.

Poh says: "Cutting down fat, sodium and sugar in the preparation of food is a good move. But some school canteen operators, who do not seem to know of the existence of the school canteen guidelines, are

selling some 'forbidden' food."

One example is junk food which is highly popular among pupils due to aggressive marketing techniques.

Basically most schools have relatively good food hygiene, but some canteen operators continue to ignore guidelines.

Andy Koh, a Form Five student at SMK Sri Sentosa, Kuala Lumpur, who regularly tucks into *chee cheong fun*, cakes, hot dog, *kari mee* and burger at the school canteen laments: "When we take the forks and spoons, we have to look carefully.

"Sometimes there are leftovers of *sambal* on the cutlery which put me off and I have no mood to eat. Insufficient clean cutlery will prompt

us to use our hands, but alas, we cannot even wash our hands because the faucet head is gone, so technically there is no water to wash our hands."

What is being done to check food standards?

Nurrie Anzara (not her real name), a Health Ministry officer, says the food quality control division looks into food handling and enforcement of rules.

"We check all aspects of cleanliness regularly based on reports from consumers, like school authorities.

"The food quality control division checks proper labelling and components present in food sold, an example being the use of additives. Nutritious food may cost more. I would say it is best if children bring home-cooked food to school which are not only economical but also more hygienically prepared."

In the meantime, students like Hiew who patrons the canteen will do the next best thing.

"I look for alternative food. I buy food that is meant for teachers which is of better quality but at a higher price."

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Table: FATS, SODIUM AND SUGAR

Types	Examples	Excessive intake	Healthy living
Saturated fats	Animal fats	Can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of coronary heart disease.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose foods that are low in fat and cholesterol. • Use cooking oil in small amounts only. • Cook foods in <i>santan</i> (coconut milk) or coconut oil less frequently. • Choose lean cuts of meat, discarding the skin where applicable (as with chicken skin). • Using small amounts of “visible” fats (for example, margarine, butter, salad oils, cream and mayonnaise). • Adopt alternative cooking methods (for example, grilling, microwaving or steaming) instead of frying in oil.
Hydrogenated fats	Hard margarine and vegetable shortening		
Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats	Vegetable oils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Help lower blood cholesterol levels ● Long-term excessive consumption of polyunsaturated fatty acids has been associated with cancer, gallstones and other diseases 	
Sodium	Present in many food, table salt, monosodium glutamate	High blood pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eat less fast food or takeaway ● Avoid processed or canned food ● Limit consumption of highly salted food and condiments (soya sauce and oyster sauce)
Sugar	Chief source of sweetening in desserts, cakes, drinks and pastries	Can contribute to nutritional inadequacy as well as dental caries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Drink plain boiled water instead of sweetened beverages ● Encourage gradual sugar reduction in foods while taste adapts to the change. ● Use 1/2 or 3/4 of the usual amount of sugar in cakes or drinks.

