



Eight tips for maintaining a healthy weight.

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MAINAINING a healthy weight does not require a magic formula. All you really need to do is practise healthy eating habits and exercise regularly.

This is important so that you do not become victims of overweight and obesity, as these can lead to non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and diabetes.

To maintain a healthy weight, you must first understand the principles of energy balance. It is essential for you to maintain the balance between the energy derived from the food you eat and the energy you use through physical activity.

If your daily energy intake regularly exceeds your energy expenditure, this will lead to weight gain, and gradually, this will lead to overweight or obesity problems. Therefore, your food choices and the amount you eat, as well as the level of physical activity you engage in, plays an important role in helping you prevent weight gain.

Energy (or calories) comes from the foods you eat every day. It is required to fuel your various bodily processes, such as maintaining heart and organ functions, as well as maintaining body temperature, muscle contraction and growth.

But how much energy intake should you have in a day?

The Malaysian Dietary Guidelines recommends a daily energy intake of 2,000-2,500 kcal for an adult male, and 1,500-2,000 kcal for an adult female.

However, many Malaysians today tend to frequently exceed their recommended daily energy intake. Coupled with urbanisation and modern lifestyles that promote physical inactivity, this has posed a threat to many Malaysians.

Recent findings from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) in 2011 showed that one out of two Malaysian adults are either overweight or obese.

Nonetheless, maintaining a healthy weight is not that hard to do. In addition to regular physical activity, here are eight eating tips to help you start living a healthier life.

1. Keep your meal balanced

Many of us tend to make the mistake of loading our plates with too much rice, a lot of fish or meat, and little or no vegetables and fruits at all.

Your daily diet should comprise of food from the five food groups – cereals, grains, cereal products or tubers; fruits; vegetables; protein-rich foods (e.g. poultry, meat, eggs and legumes); and milk and milk products.

Therefore, you may want to have some cereals with milk for breakfast, a plate of rice with steamed fish, *bayam* soup and an apple for lunch, and a bowl of *kuey teow* soup with shredded chicken, *kailan* and guava for dinner.

Besides having a balanced meal, you need to eat a variety of foods from the five food groups. This does not mean eating a lot of food at one time, but eating different types of food from the same food group. For example, for vegetables, you should not just eat *sawi* at each meal, but instead, have a variety of vegetables, e.g. broccoli, long beans, tomatoes, carrots, ladies fingers, mustard leaves or *ulam-ulaman*.

What's your weight?

Food group		
No of servings recommended for 2,000 kcal diet*		
	2000, kcal/day (servings)	Examples of one serving
Cereals and grains	6	2 slices of wholemeal bread or 1 cup of brown or white rice
Fruits	2	1 whole apple or 1 slice of papaya
Vegetables	3	½ cup of cooked dark green leafy vegetable with edible stem or ½ cup of cooked fruit vegetables or 1 cup of <i>ulam-ulaman</i>
Meat/poultry/eggs	1	1 piece of chicken (drumstick), 2 whole chicken eggs or 2 pieces of lean beef
Fish	1	1 medium <i>ikan kembung</i> , 1 piece of <i>ikan tenggiri</i> or ¾ cup of anchovies (head removed)
Legumes	1	1 cup of chickpeas/dhal or 2 pieces of <i>tauhu</i>
Milk and milk products	2	1 glass of low fat milk, 1 cup of yogurt or 1 slice of cheese

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The number of recommended servings varies based on gender, physical activity and weight status. Seek advice from a nutritionist or dietitian to calculate the recommended number of servings according to your requirements.

2. Watch your portion size

How much you eat is just as important as what you eat. For example, if you are a moderately active woman or a sedentary man, your recommended calorie intake is 2,000 kcal per day.

So, the next time you are at the dinner table or a buffet, remember to never overload your plate and always stick to the recommended serving sizes.

3. Choose foods with less fat and oil

When you are eating out, opt for foods that are prepared using healthier cooking methods such as grilling, steaming, microwaving, poaching, baking, roasting, broiling, sautéing or braising.

For instance, instead of going for fried *mee mamak*, you could choose *mee* soup instead.

The same principles also apply when having meals at home. The best way is to prepare your own food at home as it gives you control over the cooking methods you use and types of ingredients and spices you put into your dishes in order to reduce the fat and oil content.

For example, instead of deep-frying, opt for stir-frying with a non-stick pan to reduce oil usage.

Also, if poultry is your main dish, you could just spare some time to remove the skin as it contains most of the chicken fat.

4. Choose foods and beverages with less sugar

It is time to cut the sweet cravings after your meals. Sugars from food and beverages can be considered unnecessary calories that can lead to weight gain.

Be aware of the hidden sugars in many foods (e.g. cakes, local *kuihs* and other sweet desserts) and drinks you consume.

A single carbonated drink (325 ml) can contain seven to 10 teaspoons of sugar. Also, a *kuih koci* contains 2¼ teaspoons of sugar.

Also, when you are at a stall or restaurant, avoid those tempting sweet drinks like *sirap ais* or *kopi ais*; order a calorie-free drink like cold water or *teh o ais* with less sugar instead.

If you absolutely need to have something sweet after your meal, grab a piece of fruit instead.

5. Feel full with fibre

A diet that is high in fibre can help you feel full faster and for a longer period of time. This will help you avoid overeating at one meal, and also encourage you to eat less throughout

the day.

Legumes like peas, lentils and beans are the best sources of dietary fibre. One cup of chickpeas (164g) provides 12.5g of fibre, which is equivalent to 50% of your daily recommended intake.

You can also find fibre in fruits and vegetables. For example, guavas, apples and pears (if eaten with their skin) have high fibre content, while vegetables, especially the leguminous types (French beans, four-angled beans) and other vegetables with stems can provide you fibre too.

Another source of fibre can be obtained from wholegrains and wholegrain products, e.g. brown rice, oats, corn, and wholegrain breads and cereals.

Brown rice can give you eight times more fibre than white rice. Hence, aim for half of your intake of grains from wholegrains or wholegrain products (approximately at least two servings per day).

6. Practise regular meal times

Ever woken up late in the morning, and in a rush to get to work, you skipped breakfast? Many people have experienced this, but when you skip meals or go for long periods between meals, your body begins to think it is starving and this may lead you to overeat on your next meal.

Try to keep meal times regular and this will help you reduce the hunger pangs too.

So, start your day right with breakfast, followed by lunch and dinner in a timely manner. You may have healthy snacks in between meals to stave off hunger pangs.

Try to avoid late night eating or snacking frequently at 24-hour eateries as this is a departure from your regular meal times. It also increases your chances of consuming extra calories in a day.

7. Adapt a balancing plan; plan your meals ahead

Be aware of what you consume throughout each day by adapting a simple balancing plan. For example, if you had a heavier meal at lunch time, e.g. *nasi lemak* with fried chicken and *limau ais*, then consider eating a lighter meal, e.g. *meehoon* with clear soup and a glass of water at dinner time (or vice versa).

This concept can be applied within a meal too. For example, if you have decided to have *nasi lemak* for lunch, opt for a hard-boiled egg instead of chicken *rendang*.

So, plan meals in advance (daily, or even weekly) for you and your family to ensure that you have control over what and how much you consume each day. In this way, you



Opt for foods that are prepared using healthier cooking methods such as grilling, steaming, microwaving, poaching, baking, roasting, broiling, sautéing or braising. - Filepic

will always be able to stay within the recommended daily intake and keep your energy intake balanced.

8. Analyse the Nutrient Information Panel (NIP) on food labels of packaged products

To help you make healthier pre-packaged food choices, you should look out for the number of calories (energy), fat, carbohydrate, protein and other nutrients on the NIP of a food product.

The fastest way to compare calories on food packaging is by using the energy icon on the "Front of Pack".

To make a comparison of other nutrients, refer to the NIP.

Do not make your decision to purchase a product based on the content of one nutrient alone; consider the level of several nutrients. For example, a product high in vitamin C may also be high in sugar.

A food product labelled as "low fat" does not mean that it is low in calories. Similarly, a product that claims to be "cholesterol-free" may still be high in fat.

There are also products with function claims such as "calcium helps build strong bones and teeth". Nutrition claims such as these do not necessarily mean that they are the healthiest choices. Hence, don't make your decision based on such claims alone, but consider the nutrient contents in the NIP as well.

Maintaining a healthy weight doesn't mean having to change your entire eating plan. Instead, it is simply about making some minor adjustments to your diet and eating habits. Integrate healthy eating into your daily life so that you can successfully prevent overweight and obesity from taking over.

■ Assoc Prof Dr Zaitun Yassin is honorary treasurer of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, while Dr Mahenderan Appukutty is assistant honorary secretary. The authors of this article are members of the National Steering Committee of the Nutrition Month Malaysia Programme (NMM). NMM is an annual initiative jointly-organised by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, Malaysian Dietitians' Association and Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity. NMM 2014 is supported by Gardinia Bakeries (KL) Sdn Bhd, Legosan Sdn Bhd (OatBg22), Malaysia Milk Sdn Bhd (Vitagen), Nestle Products Sdn Bhd and Yakult (M) Sdn Bhd. To learn more about preventing obesity and other interesting nutrition information, visit the Nutrition Month Malaysia Family Carnival at the Mid Valley Exhibition Centre (Hall 1), Kuala Lumpur, on March 29 and 30. There will be free nutrition screenings, expert advice from nutritionists and dietitians, and much more. For more information, call 03-5632 3301, drop by the Nutrition Month Malaysia Facebook page or visit www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my.