

Less salt, please

One of the risk factors for high blood pressure is consuming too much salt – something many Malaysians are prone to doing.

By Dr TAN SUE YEE

IN recent years, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have grown to be a significant public health issue in Malaysia, despite being preventable through various lifestyle changes.

In fact, the Malaysian Burden of Disease and Injury Study 2009-2014 found that NCDs contribute to 71% of premature deaths in Malaysia.

Of this, cardiovascular (heart) diseases and diseases of the circulatory system accounted for 34.8% of deaths.

There are many lifestyle risk factors that can significantly increase the risk of developing NCDs.

These include an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, smoking tobacco and excessive alcohol consumption.

One of the most common NCDs in Malaysia is hypertension (high blood pressure), with about three in 10 adults having this condition.

Unfortunately, many are unaware that they have hypertension, as there are usually no symptoms.

This is particularly worrying as untreated or poorly controlled hypertension can lead to serious consequences such as heart attacks, strokes and other cardiovascular diseases.

Physical inactivity and an unhealthy dietary intake are risk factors for hypertension, with the latter being particularly important, as a high salt intake has been associated with an increased risk of developing the condi-

tion. In Malaysia, it is estimated that around 80% of adults are exceeding their daily recommended intake of salt.

Therefore, it is important for individuals to understand how to reduce their salt intake.

Lowering the salt

Here are some ways you can decrease your salt intake:

> Use less salt when cooking

Start by gradually reducing the amount of salt called for in the recipe and limiting the use of salty condiments (e.g. soy sauce, oyster sauce, tomato sauce).

When using canned products, omit the liquid or brine.

Instead, opt to flavour foods with herbs (e.g. basil, parsley, cilantro), spices (e.g. cinnamon, cumin, turmeric), and natural umami ingredients (e.g. seaweed, parmesan cheese, tomatoes, mushrooms, onion, garlic, ginger).

Alternatively, you can use low sodium umami seasoning to replace part of the salt used.

Umami, which is the fifth basic taste after sweet, salty, sour and bitter, has a meaty, savoury and broth-like taste.

The taste comes from glutamate, which is naturally found in our bodies and protein-rich foods.

So, for example, using half a teaspoon of monosodium glutamate (MSG), instead of one teaspoon of table salt, can help reduce your consumption of sodium by up to 40% while maintaining the taste of the dish.

> Be cautious with processed, pre-packaged foods

Processed, pre-packaged foods are one of the main sources of salt in the diet.

As such, it is important to limit the consumption of salt-preserved foods (e.g. salted fish, salted/pickled vegetables and salted egg), high-salt snacks (e.g. salted nuts, potato crisps, fish chips), instant foods (noodles, soups, etc), and other types of highly-seasoned foods (e.g. foods with salted egg powder).

Ultimately, it is advisable to read the food label and to compare the sodium content per 100g of each product. Choose brands with a lower sodium content.

> Be mindful when eating out

When eating outside, it is often difficult to directly control how much salt is in the meal you order.

Therefore, make an effort to ask for meals to be prepared with less salt.

For prepared dishes, you can avoid those cooked using salt-preserved foods, and patronise eateries that you know prepare dishes with less salt.

Photo: Photos.com



oping high blood pressure and can help maintain a healthy body weight, which consequently reduces the risk of developing other NCDs.

Exercise also helps to build healthy muscle, which helps us lead an active lifestyle and carry out various daily activities.

So, it is recommended that you:

> Get active regularly

Adults should engage in a mixture of moderate- and vigorous-intensity physical activities throughout the week.

Generally, moderate-intensity activities are those where an individual is able to talk, but not sing comfortably, while doing the activity.

Vigorous-intensity physical activities are those that make you "huff and puff".

It is recommended that adults engage in 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activities, and at least 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activities, throughout the week.

> Do exercises you enjoy

Pick any aerobic exercise that you enjoy, such as walking, jogging, swimming, dancing and cycling, and remember to include other strength and flexibility types like weightlifting, yoga and pilates.

Taking care of ourselves

At the end of the day, we are responsible for prioritising our own health.

Healthy nutrition and physical activity go hand-in-hand and can go a long way in preventing NCDs and improving one's overall well-being.

Dr Tan Sue Yee is a nutritionist and Fellow of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM). This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2023, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by NSM, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA) and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition (MSBC). NMM's Food-Fit-Fun Fair will be held in Sunway Velocity Mall, Kuala Lumpur, on June 22-25. For more information, visit www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my.

You can also start your children on a healthier dietary path by helping them to consume less sodium.

This can be done by limiting the amount of high-salt foods packed for school snacks or lunches (e.g. processed meats like nuggets, sausages, luncheon meat, ham, etc), cooking more family meals at home (preferably using less salt and healthier cooking methods like steaming, boiling or grilling), and offering more fruits and vegetables as healthy snacks instead of common salty snacks.

Regardless of how you go about reducing your salt intake, the bottom line is that reducing your salt intake to less than 5g (or one teaspoon) per day can help reduce blood pressure levels.

Keep active

Besides healthy dietary practices, a lack of physical activity is also linked to a higher risk of developing NCDs, including high blood pressure.

Exercising on a regular basis can help reduce the risk of devel-

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