

Expanding waistlines weigh heavy on Malaysia

November 27 2014, by M Jegathesan

Malaysians have a passionate love affair with their lip-smacking cuisine—rich curries, succulent fried chicken, buttery breads and creamy drinks—but it is increasingly an unhealthy relationship.

Malaysia is Southeast Asia's fattest country, where a nationwide foodie culture is feeding mounting concern over what its [health minister](#) calls "an obesity epidemic."

"We are the most obese nation in Southeast Asia, and Malaysians are becoming more and more obese," Health Minister S. Subramaniam told AFP, warning of a "crisis in unhealthy behaviour."

Nearly 45 percent of Malaysian men and almost half of women are overweight or obese, according to a 2013 study by UK medical journal Lancet, compared to global rates of around 30 percent.

A recent report by consultants McKinsey Global Institution found obesity now costs the global economy \$2 trillion in healthcare and lost productivity—or 2.8 percent of global GDP—just \$100 billion less than both smoking and armed conflict. The study warned almost half of the world's adult population will be overweight or obese by 2030 and called for a "coordinated response" from governments, retailers and food and drink manufacturers.

In Malaysia, childhood obesity rates also are climbing, from less than 10 percent a decade ago to nearly 14 percent in 2008, according to the most

recent figures, saddling health systems with a new generation of diabetes, hypertension and other obesity-related illnesses

Already, some 2.6 million adults have diabetes, a figure authorities expect to spike to 4.5 million in 2020. Malaysia has a population of around 29 million.

Couch potato

Civil engineer Kevin Lim is trying to slim down after doctors told him a few years ago that his life was at risk.

Lim, 40, who weighs 173 kg (380 pounds), has diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension and joint pains from lugging his bulk around.

"All I knew was that eating made me happy. I was a [couch potato](#), watching DVDs, and my weight rose," Lim said as he huffs through his now-regular workouts in a Kuala Lumpur fitness centre.

Malaysia is a victim of its own success, with decades of economic advancement bringing the flip-side health issues that developing countries often encounter when hunger is defeated, incomes rise, and lifestyles become more sedentary.

But a key factor is the national love for Malaysia's delicious but rich fare: spicy curries made with fattening coconut milk, carb-heavy rice dishes, and sugary drinks like teh tarik—a frothy tea with sweetened condensed milk.

The breaking of bread is of vital social and cultural importance in each of multi-racial Malaysia's main ethnic groups—Muslim Malays, Chinese, and Hindu Indians—and is enthusiastically embraced.

Open-air food stalls are a fixture in every neighbourhood, often open 24 hours and full of late-diners—a major health no-no, according to doctors.

Fast food giants McDonald's and KFC also do a roaring business, and Malaysians are among the world's top per-capita sugar consumers.

The sweet life

Compounding the issue, languid, tropical Malaysia has historically lacked a strong tradition of active outdoor leisure pursuits, due in part to the sweltering weather, Islamic modesty, and shortage of public spaces for exercise.

Subramaniam, the health minister, said the problem eventually "will affect productivity and impact our economic development."

Over the past year, the government has ramped up public-awareness campaigns and mass street-exercise activities. Subsidies that kept prices of sugar and cooking oil low have been reduced in recent years, for joint budgetary and health reasons.

Fitness chains, a relatively undeveloped industry in Malaysia, now report growing numbers of health-conscious members.

"At least three out of 10 people who sign up at our gym do it because of illnesses including obesity and heart-related illness," said Elaine Yap, marketing manager with fitness chain Jatomi, which has four outlets.

Experts say far more official action is needed.

Mohamad Ismail Noor, president of the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity, backs emerging calls to ban 24-hour food outlets, cut

sugar content in beverages, further reduce sugar and cooking oil subsidies, and build more parks.

"We need to take stern action. The government has to put its foot down and say 24-hour outlets are not healthy. Obesity is the mother of all diseases," he said.

But old habits die hard.

A study of nearly 1,700 seriously ill diabetics released last week found that more than three out of four shrugged off doctor's advice on changing their lifestyles, Malaysian media reported.

The study also reportedly found that diabetes-related eye complications in such patients increased from 35 percent in 2008 to 49 percent in 2013, while kidney complications rose six percentage points to 42 percent.

Wong Siew Hong, a 170-kg diabetic automotive mechanic, is trying.

Barely able to bend down to pick up his tools, he is trying a range of weight-loss products but can't kick his love of oily Malaysian noodle dishes and is ready to throw in the towel.

"When I walk, I feel like I am a tank. I am just too heavy," said the father of two.

"At home I just eat and sit on the sofa."

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