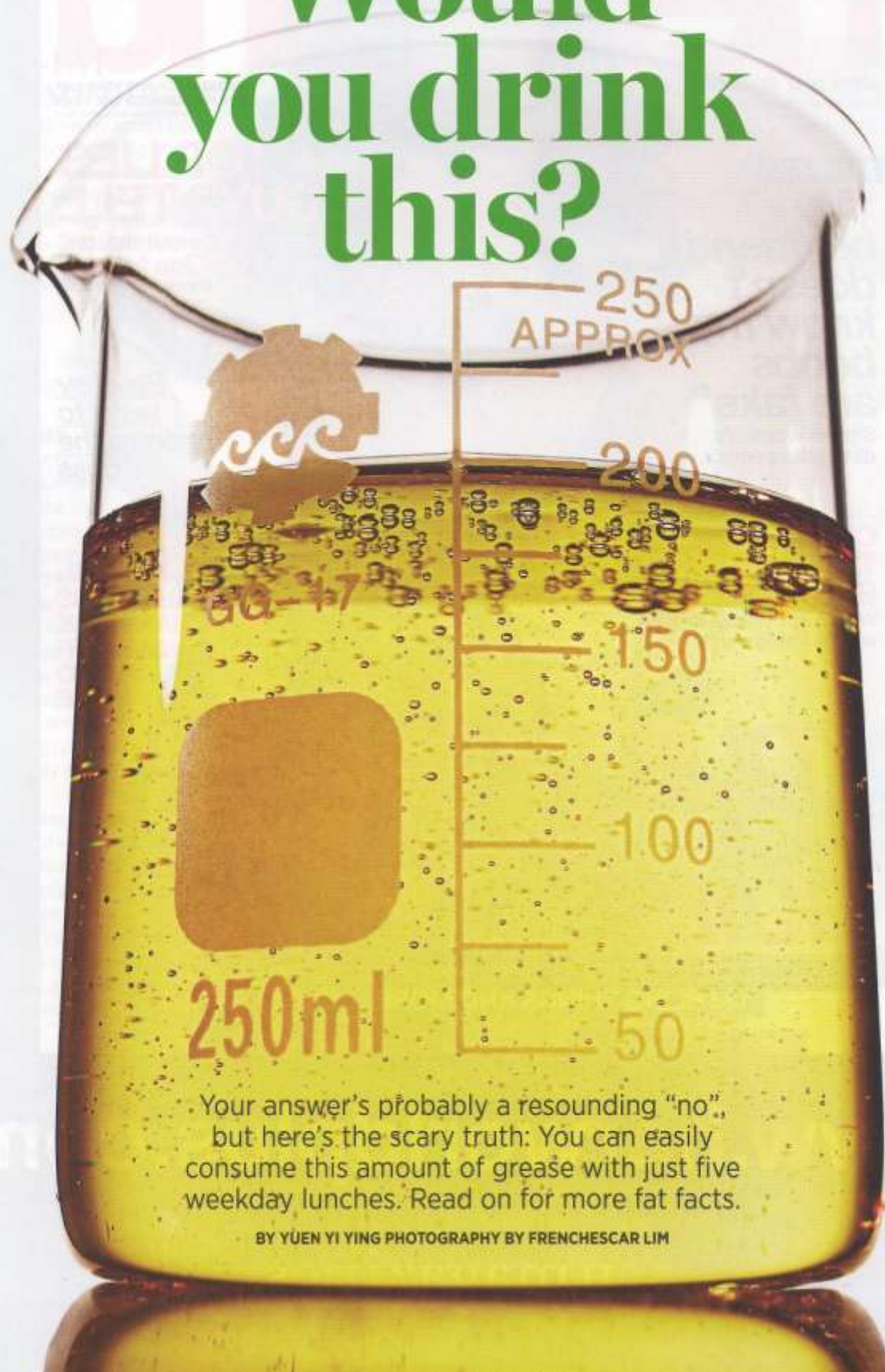


Would you drink this?



Your answer's probably a resounding "no", but here's the scary truth: You can easily consume this amount of grease with just five weekday lunches. Read on for more fat facts.

BY YUEN YI YING PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRENCHESCAR LIM



For most Singaporeans, at least one workday meal is a dine-out affair. We crunched some numbers based on a typical weekday lunch roster (Monday: mee siam, Tuesday: fish and chips, Wednesday: curry chicken, Thursday: char kway teow, Friday: laksa yong tau foo) and reeled at just how much fat these dishes contained.

That's not all. Most of the fat we're eating is saturated fat – the kind that raises the risk of heart disease and stroke. In fact, eight in 10 Singaporeans exceed their daily saturated fat limit, according to the 2004 National Nutrition Survey. That said, we're not suggesting you go on a soup-and-salad diet because there are good fats that you shouldn't deprive yourself of.

Now here's what you really need to know about different fats – whether you're watching your weight or not.

1

Not all fat is bad

There are four kinds of edible fats: polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, saturated and trans fat, says Jaclyn Reutens, clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants. The first two are considered healthy, while the other two are best avoided.

● POLYUNSATURATED

Two heart-healthy fats (that aren't produced by your body) fall under this category: omega-3 and -6. The former keeps blood flowing smoothly by preventing clots from forming and your veins from hardening. The latter helps reduce cholesterol levels, which places less burden on your ticker.

Found in Fatty fish like salmon and mackerel, and plant oils like sunflower.

● MONOUNSATURATED

These have slightly fewer carbon atoms compared to polyunsaturated fat, which means they're less solid when chilled. Like omega-6 fats, these help bring down your cholesterol levels, but they do it much faster, says Jaclyn.

Found in Plant oils like olive and canola, and most nuts like cashews and almonds.

● SATURATED

Unfortunately, the tastiest foods (think chendol and Hokkien mee) tend to be high in this LDL-cholesterol-raising fat, which raises your risk of heart disease.

Found in Animal products like lard, chicken or duck skin, wagyu beef, ghee and butter. Palm oil and coconut cream are also rich sources.

● TRANS FAT

Linked to increased inflammation, insulin resistance and heart disease, this is created when hydrogen is infused into vegetable oils to make shortening or margarine for flaky crusts. The process hardens the liquid, so it's solid even at

room temperature. Like saturated fat, this raises the amount of bad cholesterol in your body, but it deals you one more whammy: trans fat reduces the amount of good cholesterol as well.

Found in Baked and fried goods like cookies, cakes and French fries. Animal products like beef and lamb also naturally contain small amounts of the fat.

Salmon is high in heart-friendly polyunsaturated fats.



2

You need fat to live (just not too much)

Other than providing omega-3 and -6 fatty acids, fat is also needed to absorb vitamins A, D, E and K found in other foods like fruits and vegetables. That's why experts recommend you drizzle some olive oil over salads to get the most out of the fresh produce. These nutrients are needed for good eyesight, skin, bones, and to help blood clot, says Jaclyn. Fat keeps you warm, makes you feel full after meals and forms a cushion to protect organs from impact.

Fat is a source of energy as well. With 9kcal per gram (compared to 4kcal for the same amount of carbohydrates or protein), it contributes significantly to your body's calorie intake. Even worse, consumed calories that are not burned by daily activity or exercise are stored in the body as fat.

According to recommendations by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) of Singapore, the daily total fat allowance for the average woman is 56g (of which no more than 17g should be saturated fat, and no more than 2g should be trans fat). "The minimum amount of fat a woman needs is 44g," adds Jaclyn.

3

Cholesterol is not fat

Despite its waxy fat-like appearance, cholesterol is not fat, says Jaclyn. Although as much as 20 per cent can be contributed by the food you eat – eggs, organ meat and shellfish are some sources – it's produced mainly by your liver. The body needs it to produce hormones and bile but excessive amounts of cholesterol could clog arteries and cause cardiovascular problems. To maintain healthy cholesterol levels, eat more wholegrains, fruits and vegetables, says Jaclyn.

GOOD GREASE

Be a smarter – and slimmer – shopper by scanning the label on that bottle of oil. When choosing what to cook with, check its saturated fat content, says Jaclyn. The more monounsaturated fats, the better as this helps increase good cholesterol and decrease the bad. Here are eight commonly-used cooking oils, which we've ranked from best to worst (according to their saturated fat content).

- 1 Olive
- 2 Canola
- 3 Grapeseed
- 4 Sesame
- 5 Soya bean
- 6 Peanut
- 7 Palm
- 8 Butter

The monounsaturated fats in olive oil and almonds lower bad cholesterol levels.





4

Trans fat can
make you
angry

Feeling upset? Dump those fries. The trans fat in them could make you feel worse. After studying 1,000 participants, researchers at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine found that increased intake of the hydrogenated fat could make you more irritable and aggressive. A Spanish study published in the journal *Plos One* also linked trans fat intake to a higher risk of depression. Compared to those who abstained, participants who had eaten the fat had a 48 per cent higher chance of feeling blue.

With so many strikes against trans fat, it's no wonder that local health authorities are introducing measures to reduce the population's consumption. By May 2013, a new local law will mandate that all fats and oils supplied to food service establishments and manufacturers must have no more than 2g of trans fat per 100g. Fats and oils sold in supermarkets must also list their trans fat levels so consumers can make informed decisions.

5

Fat is worse
when you eat it
with sugar

There's another reason you should steer clear of junk food that is both oily and sweet. Processed snacks like candies and biscuits tend to combine high amounts of trans fat and high-fructose corn syrup, a sugar that causes insulin levels in the body to spike. This hormone leads to weight gain especially around the abdomen – one of the worst places in the body to store fat, says Pooja Vig, nutritional therapist at The Nutrition Clinic. See *The Fat In Your Body* on the next page to find out why fat in the mid-section is a major threat to your health.

FATTY BOM-BOMBS

JUST ONE SERVING OF THESE MAINS, SIDES AND DESSERTS WILL BUST YOUR RECOMMENDED DAILY FAT LIMIT.

● MAINS

Roti John A sandwich with meat, egg and onion that's fried in ghee

Per 252g serving 35g fat, 18.1g saturated fat

Char Kway Teow Rice noodles, cockles and Chinese sausage fried with sweet sauce

Per 384g serving 38g fat, 29.2g saturated fat

● SIDE DISHES

Curry chicken Chicken and potato cooked in a coconut-based curry sauce

Per 706g serving 62g fat, 26.5g saturated fat

Ayam Buah Keluak Chicken and buah keluak nuts in a thick, spicy gravy

Per 662g serving 54g fat, 17.3g saturated fat

● DESSERTS

Bubor Cha Cha Sweet potato, yam and jelly in a sweetened coconut milk soup

Per 355g serving 34g fat, 30.1g saturated fat

Red Ruby Water chestnut in a sweetened coconut milk soup

Per 389g serving 22g fat, 20.5g saturated fat

Yam Pudding (Or Ni) Yam paste combined with lard, pumpkin flesh and ginkgo nuts

Per 598g serving 73g fat, 30.5g saturated fat

6

Deep-fried food
is always bad – no
matter what oil
you use

Using a better oil (like olive) won't make deep frying healthier because it has a lower smoke point. It just leads to faster nutritional degradation, says Jaclyn. Furthermore, the batter or dough not only adds calories (from flour and eggs), it piles on those from the oil it soaks up as well.

Olive oil won't make
deep frying healthier
because it has a lower
smoke point.



THE FAT IN YOUR BODY

EXPERTS SIFT THE FACTS FROM THE MYTHS
ABOUT YOUR WOBBLY BITS.

MYTH The amount of fat cells we have in our bodies are determined at birth.

"In the early years, scientists were certain that the body could not gain more fat cells after puberty," says Dr Tey Beng Hea, senior consultant and endocrinologist at Alexandra Hospital (JurongHealth). "However, new research has shown that individuals who are sedentary and eat unhealthily actually gain fat cells over time."

The good news? Other long-term studies have proven that the body can also lose fat cells – but gradually. "If you change your lifestyle habits for good, your body will slowly begin to eliminate fat cells. When there is no excess fat to be stored in those cells for a sufficient amount of time, the body will let them go," says Dr Tey. This could take years.

FACT Crash diets don't work.

Fat cells can expand by up to six times, and once they do, it's hard for them to revert to the original size. You might shrink the cells fast with quick-fix diets, but once you reach for the bad foods again, the dormant hormones will be reactivated and you might put on even more weight than before, says Jaclyn. To prevent this, it's best to be consistent and avoid yo-yo dieting.

FACT Some fat actually burns calories.

Yellow isn't the only colour fat comes in. Brown fat burns calories to generate heat – 250kcal every three hours, or the equivalent of about 35 minutes of jogging. Unfortunately, adults have very little of it, and less if they're obese. Scientists are still finding ways to increase its activity.

FACT Fat can make you ache.

"Fat cells produce cytokines, inflammatory chemicals that could cause pain and even lead to conditions like diabetes, asthma, even arthritis," says Pooja Vig, nutritionist at The Nutrition Clinic. More of these nasties are produced when fat cells expand.

MYTH It's okay to have padding around the waist.

Visceral fat, which surrounds the heart, liver, kidneys, pancreas and intestines is more dangerous than subcutaneous fat (found directly under the skin) in other parts. Also known as intra-abdominal fat, it releases free fatty acids and inflammatory substances that circulate in the blood and wreak havoc in various organs, explains Dr Tey. "While some of these substances are still in the early stages of research, others have been found responsible for inflammatory and cancerous changes in organs such as the colon and kidney." ■