

Healthier food cheaper at hospitals

SOME public hospitals are leading the way in offering healthy hawker fare.

One can get brown rice, low-fat milk and purple wheat noodles at no extra cost, or even at discounted rates, at the food courts there.

At Singapore General Hospital, steamed chicken brown rice goes for 40 cents cheaper than the regular white rice version at its food court, and brown rice and vermicelli are 40 cents cheaper than white rice and vermicelli.

At KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH), brown rice and vermicelli are offered at the food court at no extra cost. The same goes for purple wheat noodles at the Japanese stall and toasted oats instead of peanuts in popiah.

Tan Tock Seng Hospital has vending machines dispensing low-sugar and sugar-free drinks, while National University Hospital will be placing stickers on healthier food options at its food court stalls.

Dr Grace Soon, a nutritionist and acting deputy director of the nutrition

department at the Health Promotion Board (HPB), said some hospitals began pricing brown rice, wholegrain products and healthier drinks more attractively in July this year.

Meanwhile, the food court at KKH, which like the others is open to the public, is increasing the serving size of vegetables, educating customers on the fat and calorie content of garnishes like fried anchovies and shallots, as well as offering low-fat milk in drinks and desserts.

The response has been encouraging, said KKH's chief dietitian Christine Ong.

Studies done last October and November showed that 15 per cent of customers at the food courts at KKH opted for healthier fare.

Beyond food courts, food outlets at the hospitals, such as O'Briens Irish Sandwich Bar and Mr Bean, are also being encouraged to get themselves certified under the HPB's healthier restaurant programme, where they offer healthier food items on their menus.

Even "healthier" hawker fare may contain too much salt, saturated fat or cholesterol.

HIDDEN DANGER IN YONG TAU FOO



YONG TAU FOO with mix of fried and non-fried items (tofu, taukwa, ladies' fingers, fishball, bittergourd with fish paste, served with black sauce)

Content →	Salt: 1,675g
Percentage of daily allowance →	98.5%
	Total fat: 15g
	21.2%
	Cholesterol: 88mg
	29.3%

AND OTHER HAWKER FOOD

ECONOMICAL RICE (usual amount of rice, sweet and sour pork, curry vegetables, omelette)

Calories: 1004
50%
Total fat: 55g
82%
Saturated fat: 22g
105%

FRIED FISH SOUP with evaporated milk and vermicelli

Calories: 730
37%
Total fat: 28g
42%
Saturated fat: 13g
62%

BEE HOON SOTO (thin rice noodles with shredded chicken and fried onion in spicy soup)

Salt: 1,533mg
90.2%
Dietary fibre: 3.6g
13.8%
Cholesterol: 63mg
21%

GADO GADO (salad with lontong, long beans, egg and potato, mixed in peanut sauce)

Salt: 1,082mg
63.6%
Total fat: 40g
56.3%
Cholesterol: 19.4mg
74.6%

Sources: HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD, APTIMA NUTRITION & SPORTS CONSULTANTS

GRAPHICS: POON CHIAN HUI and MIKE M DIZON PHOTOS: ST FILE PHOTO, SAKURAI MIDORI

Health alert as even more eat out

There's too much salt and calories in 'healthy' hawker favourites

■ BY POON CHIAN HUI

SINGAPOREANS are eating out more often than ever, and the bad news is this: Even so-called healthier hawker food is not really that healthy.

From yong tau foo to soup noodles, many quick meals have too much salt, or are high in calories and low in fibre.

Latest figures from the Health Promotion Board (HPB) show that the median number of times people have their meals outside their home each week is eight, up from seven in 2004.

That means half of those surveyed ate out eight or more times a week.

An earlier HPB check showed about 60 per cent of Singaporeans ate out each week this year, up from 49 per cent in 2004.

Too much eating out has been cited as a reason Singaporeans are becoming fatter. One in 10 – or 10.8 per cent – is now obese, up from 6.9 per cent in 2004, the latest National Health Survey shows.

Most people eat at food centres, and dietitians pointed out that hawker food – even soupy dishes supposedly more healthy – may not be entirely good for the health.

Salt is one problem. A bowl of sliced fish soup, for example, packs 70 per cent of the daily recommended salt intake while a teriyaki chicken rice bowl has about 50 per cent.

HPB nutritionist Seah Peik Ching said: "Soupy dishes such as fishball soup are considered lighter as they have fewer calories compared to dishes that are fried or

come with heavy gravy. However, soupy dishes tend to be high in sodium."

Other so-called healthier choices contain paltry amounts of fibre, which is important for a healthy digestive system.

For example, a Japanese salmon bento rice set has 560 calories but only 3g of fibre, or 12 per cent of the daily recommended intake.

To eat healthily when eating out, Ms Seah suggests asking for more vegetables and less oil, salt and gravy.

But even vegetables may not be free of danger. Dietitian Bibi Chia, director of nutrition consultancy Eat Wise, pointed out that many vegetable dishes may be stir-fried with palm oil which is high in saturated fat and flavoured with high-salt condiments like soy sauce.

"I will still recommend eating vegetable over meat dishes, but try not to drink the sauce that comes with it," she said.

Also, she added, avoid vegetables that

look overcooked, which strips them of vitamins.

Aircraft technician Johnny Lee, 37, who eats 20 meals a week outside, including breakfast, said hawkers do not seem to care much about serving healthy food.

He said he was concerned about food with too much salt and monosodium glutamate (MSG), as well as lard. But he never asks the hawkers to cut back on salt or oil, saying it would be too troublesome, given that most hawker food is pre-prepared.

Most hawker dishes also come with too much rice or noodles, said Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants.

She said dishes such as fish soup are considered healthier because they are lower in fat and calories, but people should still be mindful because "portion control is important".

The HPB has been encouraging food

courts and restaurants to offer healthier options. Its healthier dining programme, which began in 2003, now has more than 2,000 hawker stalls offering healthier versions of dishes.

Examples include chicken rice with rice flavoured using garlic and pandan leaves instead of chicken fat, and fried carrot cake topped with beansprouts instead of only spring onions.

Since October, HPB has started tracking whether people ask for healthier choices at food courts and restaurants.

Mr Michael Tan, chairman of Albert Centre Hawkers' Committee, said more customers are asking for healthier fare.

"The economical rice stall is now offering more vegetable dishes because of customers' demands," he said. "Even for dishes like fishball soup, people are asking for more vegetables."

✉ chpoon@sph.com.sg
Additional reporting by Salma Khalik