

## Have Your Favourite Hawker Foods and Eat It - Guilt-Free



Saturday, Jul 12, 2014

Men's Health

**By Justin Harper**

SINGAPORE - Breakfast is the most important meal of the day for a reason. Get it right and you will jump-start your day with energy. Get it wrong and you will achieve very little, apart from an expanded waistline.

"Some of our local dishes are the worst foods you can eat, especially the first thing in the morning," says Jab Wan, nutrition advisor and managing director of Integrated Training Institute. But you don't have to trade your nasi lemak for bland oatmeal.

These five choices - one or two may even surprise you - will kick-start your day without leaving your taste buds out in the cold.

### **Mee siam**

Don't be put off by the amount of calories (694kcal) and carbohydrates (91g) this dish contains. Rice vermicelli (bee hoon) - the noodle used in mee siam - is considered a medium GI food with a glycemic index of 58, meaning it won't drastically spike your blood sugar levels.

Another way to make this Malay dish healthier is to leave half the noodles unfinished, and slurp up less of the oily and sodium-laden gravy, which will help bring the calorie count to below 450kcal, advises clinical dietician Jaclyn Reutens.

In terms of Malay cuisine, mee siam is also healthier than its more robust sibling, mee rebus.

The good news: You don't have to pass up on the hard-boiled egg and tofu.

Together, they may provide up to 20g of protein. Coupled with the carb content, this may make an ideal choice for a post-workout meal, as you'll replenish your glycogen stores as well, adds Jab.

- **Time you'll need to run to burn off this dish: 57 minutes (694 calories).**

### **Sliced fish bee hoon**

An obvious choice for health-conscious men, this breakfast dish nevertheless requires a few tweaks for a winning formula.

The soup - which is usually made from boiled fish heads, ginger, coriander and tomatoes - has a sodium content that's greater than half your daily recommended intake, so consider leaving half the soup in the bowl, advises Sarah Sinaram, senior dietitian at Raffles Diabetes & Endocrine Centre.

And to complete your order, tell the stallholder to leave out the fried onions in favour of more spring onions. The latter contains flavonoid compounds that may help prevent cancer, according to The American Journal Of Clinical Nutrition.

If there's the option of adding more vegetables, do that as well.

If you're a fan of drinking the soup with added evaporated milk, remember that you're adding an extra 50 calories, says Jaclyn.

"Steer clear of fried fish slices as well, which would otherwise double the calorie count because of the oil used to fry the fish," she warns.

- **Time you'll need to run to burn off this dish: 25 minutes (349 calories).**

#### **Nasi lemak**

A combination of rice steamed with coconut milk and paired with fried anchovies, egg and chicken wing doesn't sound like the healthiest breakfast. But hold that thought.

First counterpoint: A study of two Polynesian communities found no evidence linking the intake of high saturated fat from coconut products to vascular disease, which is virtually non-existent in both populations. (A serving of rice contains about a quarter-cup of coconut milk.)

Secondly, the serving of fried anchovies, or ikan bilis, is chock-full of nutrients.

"It contains a good dose of iron, omega-3 polyunsaturated fats and calcium," says nutritionist Sheeba Majmudar.

The size of the fish also means it's less likely to be contaminated, she adds. But there's a catch after all: This side dish is sky-high in sodium content, so your nasi lemak meal should best be eaten as a reward after your morning run.

- **Time you'll need to run to burn off this dish: 47 minutes (657 calories)**

#### **Kaya toast with two soft-boiled eggs**

Sorry folks, the straight-up advice here is to leave out the coconut jam (high in sugar) and margarine (high in fat) in your toast. But grumble not: The plain toasts still taste good dipped in soft-boiled eggs.

Sacrifice the spreads and you'll save 150 calories, says Jaclyn.

She adds that a thinner spread of kaya is a good compromise. When you do this and leave out the dark soya sauce for the eggs, you can shave off about 20 per cent of the calories and minimise your sodium intake.

What about the cholesterol in eggs? Latest research shows that foods high in cholesterol play only a very small role in raising blood cholesterol levels, and this with the nutritious egg yolks included.

The American Heart Association recommends limiting cholesterol intake to 300mg daily, or 200mg if you have heart disease or if your low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is greater than 100.

- **Time you'll need to run to burn off this dish: 21 minutes (288 calories).**

### **Thosai**

Made from fermented rice, lentils and chickpea flour batter, this Indian pancake is the healthier alternative to roti prata, which has up to 18 times more fat.

On its own, it is low in calories and fat (one thosai contains only 1g of ghee) but the plain pancake is usually served with curry or dhal. Another popular variation, masala thosai, comes filled with potatoes and cheese or egg.

Eating this triples your calorie count to 363kcal.

To make this dish healthier, go easy on the curry. Limit yourself to four tablespoons, advises Jaclyn, who is from Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants.

This gives you 60 extra calories and 2g of fat. Or substitute with dhal (mashed lentils) as a side instead - it contains an extra 5g of protein and 3g of fibre.

- **Time you'll need to run to burn off this dish: 7 minutes (97 calories), 14 minutes with curry**

### **Drink yourself slim**

Bolster your healthier breakfast with these waistline-friendly beverage tips.

- **Reduce sweetness**

Making a request of siu dai (less sugar or condensed milk) with your kopi or teh will save you about 50 calories, states clinical dietician Jaclyn Reutens.

- **Pick the right milk**

Going for evaporated milk instead of the condensed stuff (for example, kopi-c instead of kopi) will shave off one-third the calories, although saturated fat levels may still be high, warns senior dietitian Sarah Sinaram.

- **Go for homemade**

"Such beverages are slightly better because you can ask for less milk and sugar than pre-made or canned drinks.

But avoid non-dairy creamers, which are high in saturated fat and may increase cholesterol levels," advises Sarah.

- **Don't finish it**

Leave a third of your kopi or teh unfinished. Or order the smaller cup if the stall offers it. Some degree of self-discipline is needed.



### **Top 5 local breakfasts to eat**

**One piece of thosai:** 97 calories and 2g fat

If roti prata is your usual choice, pick thosai instead. Thosai is made from rice flour, chickpea flour, yeast and spices.



One thosai has only 1g (about 5 teaspoons) of ghee - clarified butter that is extremely high in calories and saturated fat.

In comparison, one roti prata needs 18g of ghee, so the figures shoot up to 184 calories and 9g of fat, says jaclyn Reutens, clinical dietitian from Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants.



Thosai is also cooked in a healthier way - on a hot plate with just a little oil to prevent the dough from sticking.

To keep it healthy, go easy on the gravy, advises Jaclyn. "Limit it to less than one quarter of a cup (about 4 tablespoons). This gives you 60 calories and about 2g of fat. Side dishes like rava and chutney have about 25 calories a tablespoon."



**A bowl of chicken porridge:** 177 calories and 5g fat

"Porridge is rice cooked with more water, hence the larger volume, so it's all right to eat the full serving you get from the hawker stall," says Jaclyn. "In comparison, 500g of cooked rice has three times the number of calories."



However, this doesn't mean that you can eat all kinds of porridge.

Chicken and fish, says Jaclyn, are the healthiest. "Pork porridge has 286 calories and 12g fat."



It's better, too, to opt for porridge over congee, which has a thicker consistency.

Because it's thicker, congee has more rice grains, and in turn, more carbohydrates. Jaclyn says it has 10 per cent more calories than porridge.



**Two slices of plain toast with two soft-boiled eggs:** 243 calories and 11g fat

For a low-fat breakfast, skip the kaya and butter - plain toast tastes just as good dipped in soft-boiled eggs.



"The spread will add an extra 150 calories to the meal, and that's mainly from fat," notes Jaclyn.

There's no harm in adding pepper and soya sauce to the eggs, as the additional calories are negligible.



But avoid the soya sauce if you suffer from high blood pressure - it's high in sodium.



**A bowl of sliced-fish bee hoon:** 254 calories and 5g fat

This contains a good amount of carbohydrates, protein and fibre, so eat half or three quarters of it. "You can finish the soup though, as it is mainly made from boiled fish heads, coriander, ginger and tomatoes," says Jaclyn.



If you add milk to the soup, you are adding 50 calories. If you add milk and fried fish slices, you'll double the total calories count to 500 because of the oil used to fry the fish, Jaclyn warns.



If you'd rather have a bowl of sliced-fish soup with rice, go ahead.

The calorie count is similar to bee hoon, says Jaclyn. "Still, you would have to eat only half or three quarters of the rice, like with the noodles."



**A plate of mee siam:** 694 calories and 24g of fat

Yes, it's a lot of calories, carbohydrates (92g) and fat.



So eat only half the noodles and slurp up less gravy, and you could cut your calorie intake to 431. Jaclyn says that if you compare mee siam to other Malay breakfast dishes like nasi lemak and mee rebus, it is still healthier.



You don't have to skip the hard-boiled egg and tofu - they provide protein. And the egg will fill you up so you don't end up snacking before lunch.



"Leave about four tablespoons of gravy behind," advises Jaclyn. "The gravy is oily and high in sodium as it is cooked with bean paste and chilli oil."

Or try eating mee siam made with brown rice vermicelli - available at Marquini Food in Yuhua Hawker Centre in Block 347, Jurong East Ave 1.



We've given you the best, so what are the worst? We put the hawker foods that we commonly eat for breakfast to the test, and this is our list:

### 1. Fried Bee Hoon with Luncheon Meat and Egg

935 calories,  
46g carbohydrate,  
22g protein,  
41g fat,  
6.6g fibre,  
1,351mg sodium



This is literally the worst breakfast to have – ever!

Just a plate of it contains 935 calories - almost 40 per cent of the Health Promotion Board's daily recommended intake of 2,400 calories.

The luncheon meat also raises eyebrows, as it's processed with chemicals and contributes to the high fat content in the dish.



"Having this for breakfast frequently will cause problems for your heart," Wan says.

"Also, the recommended daily sodium intake for adults is between 2,000mg and 2,400mg. That amounts to less than a teaspoon. This dish alone gives you over 1,000mg – nearly half your recommended daily allowance."



Sodium, a common mineral found in processed food, is one of the main culprits for the development of hypertension or high blood pressure.

Researchers from the University of Helsinki found that a one-third decrease in salt intake can result in a reduction of 10mmHg of both systolic and diastolic blood pressure.



“Reducing your blood pressure also means your heart works less, which reduces the risk of coronary heart disease,” Wan says.



## 2. Mee Siam

694 calories,  
92g carbohydrate,  
28g protein,  
24g fat,  
9.2g fibre,  
2,659mg sodium



Yes, mee siam is healthier than other similar dishes such as mee rebus, but a bowl of mee siam still packs more sodium than you should safely consume in a day.

Furthermore, with 92g of carbs, it's filling you up with an excess of energy that will only be stored as fat, unless you're planning some serious gym work during your lunch break.



Fortunately, rice vermicelli - the white noodle in mee siam - has a glycemic index of 58, which makes it a medium G.I. food (the lower the G.I., the longer it'll keep you full).

“Avoid carb-laden meals for breakfast,” explains Wan. “What happens when you eat a dish like this is that your blood sugar levels will spike drastically and ‘crash’ soon after, leaving you feeling lethargic.”



However, he adds that you can have a slightly heavier carb-laden meal only if you've had a really hard workout before breakfast.

“It'll help you replenish your glycogen stores,” says Wan.



### 3. Fried Carrot Cake with Egg and Dark Sweet Sauce

493 calories,  
42g carbohydrate,  
2g protein,  
35g fat,  
5.9g fibre,  
1,289mg sodium



Consuming some carbs for breakfast is a good way to jump-start your body's engine in the morning. But this dish has disproportionately more carbs than protein.

Similar to what happens when you eat mee siam, your blood sugar levels will spike, then crash.



"It's better to have more protein (in comparison to carbs) for breakfast because it's digested much slower and leaves your energy sustained throughout the next two to three hours," he explains.

"It'll also raise your resting metabolism, give your body the needed replenishment for muscle tissue, and helps it to grow."



### 4. Roti Prata with Chicken Curry

461 calories,  
42g carbohydrate,  
23g protein,  
23g fat,  
5g fibre,  
895mg sodium

Here's the scoop on one of Singapore's morning favourites: Not only is it high in carbs, the margarine that's commonly used to fry it is loaded with hydrogenated or trans fats.





“Adding hydrogen to vegetable oils changes its molecular structure and lengthens its shelf life; it’s only one molecule away from becoming plastic!” says Wan. “Eating margarine in the long term clogs your arteries and endangers your heart.”



## 5. Mee Rebus

571 calories,  
82g carbohydrate,  
23g protein,  
17g fat,  
8g fibre,  
2,164mg sodium



Floating in the salty-sweet brown gravy of a bowl of mee rebus is a copious amount of salt.

“A bowl of mee rebus is only 300mg shy of a teaspoon of salt! Sodium in excess also causes you to be bloated and retain water,” Wan says.



The obvious solution is to ask for less gravy and eat as little of it as you can. Or have a banana after this meal.

The fruit is abundant in potassium, a mineral that may neutralise the heart-damaging effects of salt, says nutritional epidemiologist Dr Elena Kuklina.



Potassium-rich foods, including fruits and vegetables, have long been recommended as a dietary defence against heart disease and other chronic illnesses.