



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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CAP: Reduce sodium intake to stop high blood pressure

World Hypertension Day is observed annually on May 17 with the aim of raising awareness on hypertension and spreading knowledge on this common cardiovascular condition. Hypertension is a condition associated with increased risk for stroke, kidney failure, premature mortality and disability. About 32.7 percent of Malaysians aged 18 years and above are suffering from hypertension. According to the Health Ministry, it is estimated that one in three adults suffer from high blood pressure. It also estimates that one out of five adults may already be having high blood pressure but have yet to be diagnosed.

The increasing prevalence of hypertension is attributed to various behavioral risk factors such as unhealthy diet, smoking, harmful use of alcohol, inadequate physical activity and exposure to persistent stress. The risk also increased among those with other co-morbidities such as diabetes.

A recent study found that Malaysians consume 8.7 grams of salt daily which is 1.7 times higher than the World Health Organisation's recommendation of 5 grams a day. Table salt (sodium chloride) is the major source of sodium in the Malaysian diet. One teaspoon or 5g of salt provides 2,000 mg of sodium.

Scientists believe that sodium increases blood pressure because sodium attracts water and causes fluid retention. The additional fluid retained expands the volume of blood in the arteries, which then puts pressure on the walls of the blood vessels, resulting in elevated blood pressure.

There are various reasons why Malaysians are consuming too much sodium:

- > Unhealthy modern eating habits which rely on convenience foods (canned foods, instant foods, fast foods, hawker foods) and processed foods (salty snacks, commercially prepared breads) which have high sodium content. For example, a single packet of instant noodles already contains 2,000mg of sodium which is the maximum allowable daily intake of sodium.
- > A lot of sodium additives are hidden in processed foods. Some examples are monosodium glutamate or MSG (a flavour enhancer), sodium saccharin (a sweetener), sodium phosphates (emulsifiers stabilizers, buffers) sodium caseinate (a thickener and binder) and sodium nitrite (a preservative). There are over 40 types of sodium-based additives allowed in processed foods.
- > Salty or hidden high-salt seasoning like sauces and seasoning cubes are added to food during home and restaurant cooking.
- > Habitual and excessive intake of local high salt foods like salted fish, salted eggs and salted vegetables.
- > Modern food processing methods. Salt is sometimes added to canned and frozen fruits to prevent

darkening of some fruits and to add to the flavour. For example canned and bottled citrus drinks are sometimes buffered with sodium citrate.

Excessive sodium intake has also been associated with a number of health conditions other than raised blood pressure. It also increases the risk of stomach cancer and the rate of deterioration in kidney function of patients with renal disease; it is also associated with urinary stones; and it may aggravate asthma and osteoporosis.

Although it is important that consumers are advised to consume less sodium or choose low-salt foods, the widespread use of sodium in processed foods and foods prepared away from home or eaten outside is a major barrier to achieving any meaningful reduction in dietary sodium intake. Therefore there is a need to reduce the sodium content of processed foods and drinks.

As May 17 has been dedicated as World Hypertension Day and in view of the escalating number of hypertension cases among Malaysians the Consumers Association of Penang calls on the government to:

- > Make it mandatory for food manufacturers to show the amount of sodium on the labels of food products.
- > Stop the advertisements of food products that contain high levels of sodium such as instant noodles.
- > Launch a massive campaign to encourage consumers to engage in physical activities to reduce obesity, which can lead to high blood pressure.

Meanwhile consumers are advised to:

- > Avoid consuming processed foods.
- > Use less salt and seasonings in cooking at home, instead use various natural herbs and condiments to add flavour to the food.
- > Choose food with less salt and sauces when purchasing foods away from home, either as takeaways or when dining out.
- > Lobby the government for compulsory labeling of sodium in processed foods.
- > Read the nutrition information panel (NIP) and find out the amount of sodium in foods intended to be purchase. (Some imported foods or foods produced for export have sodium amounts listed on their labels)

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