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Consumers Association of Penang
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Letter to the Editor

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CAP: Salt the silent killer in our food

In conjunction with World Salt Awareness Week (8 - 14 March), the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) calls on consumers to be cautious of their daily salt consumption.

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 of salt (or 2,000mg of sodium) a day. One teaspoon or 5grams of table salt provides 2,000 mg of sodium.

Scientists believe that sodium increases blood pressure because it 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.

Excessive salt intake can lead to hypertension which is associated with increased risk for stroke, kidney failure, premature mortality and disability.

High salt intake also increases the risk of stomach cancer and renal disease; it is also associated with urinary stones; and it may aggravate asthma and osteoporosis.

Recently the Guardian reported a study conducted by Action on Salt (an organisation based in the UK) which found more than half of seemingly healthy snacks analysed by experts were high in fat, salt and/or sugar. They tested 119 snacks, including dried/roasted pulses and processed pulse snacks such as lentil curls, chickpea chips and puffs. They found some samples to be saltier than seawater. In Malaysia popular snack food such as papadum (vegetarian crackers) and keropok (fish crackers) were also found to contain high levels of sodium.

In a test conducted by CAP on 11 samples of papadum, we found the sodium level to be more than 1000 mg per100gram in all the samples tested. Out of which 4 samples were found to contain more than 2000mg per100grams.

In another study conducted on 17 samples of keropok it was found that the sodium levels to range from 1183 -1887mg per100 grams. The addition of salt and monosodium glutamate during the manufacturing process contributed to the high sodium content in the keropok.

Besides consuming papadum and keropok there are various other reasons why Malaysians are consuming too much sodium:

- Unhealthy consumption of convenience foods (canned foods, potato chips, instant foods, fast foods, hawker foods) and processed foods (commercial 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 also use a lot of salt. It is sometimes added to canned and frozen fruits to prevent darkening of some fruits and as a flavouring agent. For example canned and bottled citrus drinks are sometimes buffered with sodium citrate.
- Eating foods sold at restaurants and stalls which are salty. This caters to the taste buds of the majority of Malaysians who have a high threshold for salt intake.

In order to control hypertension and reduce premature deaths among Malaysians, the Consumers Association of Penang calls on consumers 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.
- 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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