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Letter to the Editor

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CAP: Tackling Rising Food Prices in Malaysia

The rising cost of food has become a daily concern for many families, and Malaysian consumers are increasingly feeling the pinch.

People are reacting to these price hikes with frustration and disbelief. Social media is abuzz with comparisons and complaints. It is clear that the public is under pressure and questioning whether these increases are justified. Rather than continuing to complain, consumers must seek alternative ways to manage and address the issue.

Surveys show that families now spend nearly one-third of their income on meals, up from one-quarter just five years ago. While many consumers remain hopeful, it is unlikely that the cost of goods and services will decrease. In fact, prices are likely to continue rising.

One way to address this challenge is for the government to spearhead an austerity drive. A nationwide public awareness campaign should be launched to educate and train consumers on how to live within their means. This effort should involve schoolchildren, college and university students, the public and private sectors, and households.

Every household must be cost-conscious and learn to be thrifty (without being stingy), ensuring that all spending is justified and purposeful.

Community gardens, rooftop farms, and digital markets offer opportunities to cut out middlemen and reduce food miles. If scaled effectively, these initiatives could help mitigate rising food prices and create new green jobs for young people.

Due to work commitments, cooking and eating together as a family is no longer the norm for many households. As food is readily available, cooking at home is often neglected. However, commercialised meals pose serious health risks. These foods are frequently high in fat, sugar, and salt, often prepared under unhygienic conditions, and not worth the cost.

Malaysians have strong reasons to reduce the widespread use of fats and sugars in local diets. The country has one of the highest rates of diabetes, strokes, and heart disease in Southeast Asia. Experts attribute this trend to rising affluence, sedentary lifestyles, and a growing number of working mothers. In general, Malaysians are eating more — and consuming higher-calorie foods.

Diabetes and end-stage renal failure are critical health concerns. Studies show Malaysia is on the brink of a nationwide kidney disease crisis, with at least 15.5 per cent — or over five million people — currently living with chronic kidney disease.

Another major concern is that four out of five people with diabetes will die of heart disease, the country's number one killer. On average, six new cases of stroke occur every hour in Malaysia.

High sugar intake, which also contributes to obesity, is a significant factor behind Malaysia's diabetes crisis. Malaysians consume an average of 26 teaspoons of sugar daily and rank eighth in global sugar consumption.

Despite various government campaigns promoting healthier lifestyles, the nation's health continues to deteriorate. The incidence of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes is steadily increasing.

A more holistic approach is urgently needed, and the solution begins in the kitchen of every home. Nothing compares to home-cooked food, where one can make healthier choices and save money at the same time.

In light of rising food prices and worsening public health, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) calls on:

- The Ministry of Education to introduce cooking classes in schools for all students, regardless of gender. Young people must learn how to prepare nutritious meals for themselves and their families.
- The Ministry of Health to launch a robust campaign promoting healthy eating habits.
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security to promote and support community gardens and rooftop farms.

Tips to Make Cooking Easier and More Enjoyable

Plan Meals

It is important to plan your menus in advance. This could be just a few days ahead or even a couple of weeks. Know exactly what you will be preparing the next day. Keep your meals simple and use common, easily available ingredients.

Make a Master Pantry List

Once you have developed a repertoire of simple meals with common ingredients, stock your pantry with these items. Keep a running list of what you have on hand and in what quantity. Try to buy these items when they are on offer, but always check the expiry dates.

Create a Master Grocery List

This may take some effort initially but will save time later. Make a list of the items you regularly purchase on a weekly or monthly basis. Before each shopping trip, check what you need to replenish and refer to this list.

Keep a Price Sheet

Track your spending on food items. Use a small notebook to note down prices as you shop, then compile a master list on your computer. This is essential for managing your budget effectively.

Use the Freezer

When cooking, try to make a double batch and freeze one portion. This will be invaluable on busy days when you do not have time to cook, and it helps reduce the temptation to buy fast food or eat out.

Keep the Kitchen Clean

It is far more motivating to cook in a clean and tidy kitchen than in a cluttered one. Clean up as you go to maintain a pleasant and efficient cooking space.

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