

GOOD TO READ

The Possible Culprit of Obesity in Malaysia – ‘Pisang Goreng’!

Tan Jia Yi

Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,
Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu,
Sabah, Malaysia

*Corresponding author's email:
jjytan97@gmail.com

Received: 3 April 2020

Accepted: 20 August 2020

Obesity has become a global health issue, not to mention Malaysia, which topped over the list of countries in Asia. On World Health Day in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that 64% of the male population and 65% of the female population in Malaysia are either obese or overweight¹. The ringing of alarm is tremendously loud in the silence. Depending on each of us, this can be an issue that we laugh over or a kind but severe urge for us to take a step backwards, observe, and self-reflect.

Malaysia is well known for its wide variety of local cuisine, which delights both the tourists and the locals. The ubiquitous accessibility of cheap and succulent food, especially snacks, can be the culprit of the rising prevalence of obesity in Malaysia. In 2013, the Harvard School of Public Health had addressed on toxic food environment being one of the factors of obesity². In Malaysia, there are several studies on overweight and obesity based on the food environment by settings – families³, neighbourhoods⁴, school⁵, and worksites⁶. What if Malaysians are being brought up in a way that is way too close to banana fritter locally known as ‘*pisang goreng*’ in every stage of their life from being children to adults, adding extra kilograms on the weighing scale? A study done in Mexican cities found that body-mass-index is significantly associated with the availability and accessibility of the food⁷.

According to Guidance on Calories for 200 Types of Food⁸ produced and published by the Ministry of Health of Malaysia, one piece of '*pisang goreng*' at 65 g contains 129 calories. Having two small cute pieces of them is almost equivalent to a plate of chicken rice at 250 g – is not it daunting to know this fact? In Malaysia, the vendors of '*pisang goreng*' had six customers in 2 hours⁹, yet we do not know how many pieces of '*pisang goreng*' will be taken away by each customer. The only thing we can be sure of is that the person will probably take away with more than two pieces of '*pisang goreng*' since they are always sold in bulk.

Imagine that it is 4.00 p.m. now. Somehow the stomach is reminding that it has cleared off the havoc from lunch and cannot be readier to embrace some snacks. So, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Indulging with '*pisang goreng*' with its crispy covering and sweet, soft, and hot filling along with a cup of iced coffee when you are sitting in the air-conditioned room is undoubtedly a more comfortable choice than working out on your clumsy body and sweating. What is more, this privilege can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of their income, as '*pisang goreng*' is not only cheap but also handy to grab in every little corner of Malaysia. Banana fritter is inevitably the best option if someone is looking for cheap yet yummy food that keeps the tummy full when he is on a tight budget.

It may seem unfair to point our fingers towards something innocent and lifeless as such '*pisang goreng*', but the fact that Malaysia is rife with cheap but delicious local snacks is one of the aspects upon which we need to reflect. Self-control is essential, but when it has come to a point when the citizens are no longer paying attention to pieces of advice given by the government and selectively choose to neglect the comorbidities and the economic burden that potentially come together with obesity – tackling other aspects for possible changes may help. It is time to make a difference before we persistently top over other countries for the coming decades.

REFERENCES

1. Kaur N. (2019). Malaysia and WHO call for more investment in primary health care the 21st century. World Health Organization. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/malaysia/news/detail/08-04-2019-malaysia-and-who-call-for-more-investment-in-primary-health-care-the-21st-century>
2. The President and Fellows of Harvard College. (2012). Obesity prevention source: Toxic food environment. School of Public Health, Harvard T. H. Chan. Retrieved from <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/obesity-prevention-source/obesity-causes/food-environment-and-obesity/>
3. Ahmad N, Shariff Z.M., Mukhtar F et al. (2018). Family-based intervention using face-to-face sessions and social media to improve Malay primary school children's adiposity: A randomized controlled field trial of the Malaysian REDUCE programme. *Nutr J* 17: 74
4. Chee CK, Yoon LC, Kuang HL et al. (2019). Association between availability of neighborhood fast food outlets and overweight among 5 – 18 years old children in Peninsular Malaysia: A cross-sectional study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16 (4): 593.
5. Ishak SIZ, Chin YS, Taib MNM, Sharif ZM et al. (2016). School-based intervention to prevent overweight and disordered eating in secondary school Malaysian adolescents: A study protocol. *BMC Public Health* 16: 1101.
6. Cheong SM, Kandiah M, Chinna K et al. (2010). Prevalence of obesity and factors associated with it in a worksite setting in Malaysia. *Journal of Community Health* 35 (6): 698 – 705.
7. Barrera LH, Rothenberg SJ, Barquera S, Cifuentes E. (2016). The toxic food environment around elementary schools and childhood obesity in Mexican Cities. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 51 (2): 264 – 270.
8. Ministry of Health Malaysia. (n.d.). Panduan nilai kalori 200 jenis makanan. Retrieved from <https://www.moh.gov.my/moh/resources/auto%20download%20images/589d76329b332.pdf>
9. Lim SS. (2014). Obesity and dining out: An exploration of dietary trends in urban Malaysia. University of South Florida. Graduate theses and dissertations. Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5061>