



MALAYSIA is currently navigating a “nutrition transition”.

As lifestyles become more urbanised and fast-paced, traditional diets are being replaced by meals high in refined carbohydrates, added sugars and processed foods. Walk into any neighbourhood and you will find *nasi lemak* at dawn, economy rice at lunch, fried noodles at teatime and something sizzling at the *mamak* long past midnight. We celebrate with food, bond over food and comfort ourselves with food.

Yet despite this abundance, Malaysia continues to struggle with rising rates of overweight, obesity and diabetes.

According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023, more than half of Malaysian adults are overweight or obese and about one in six lives with diabetes. These numbers are not small and they are not improving.

When our “usual” dietary patterns repeat daily, the body quietly accumulates excess energy while missing out on fibre, vegetables, fruits and whole foods. Over time, that imbalance contributes to weight gain, insulin resistance and increased risk of chronic diseases.

This is why we can be well-fed, yet under-nourished.

Why information alone isn't enough

Malaysians today are exposed to more nutrition information than any previous generation.

We see calorie labels. We hear about “balanced meals.” We follow fitness influencers. Many people use mobile apps to track calories or steps. Health advice appears in our social media feeds almost daily.

With so much information available, shouldn't we be healthier? Not necessarily.

Behavioural research consistently shows that knowledge alone does not automatically change habits. Knowing that vegetables are good for you does not make them magically appear on your plate, especially when convenience, cost, time pressure and taste preferences are competing for attention.

Information is necessary, but not sufficient.

Food everywhere, nutrition nowhere

Why is more nutrition information not making Malaysians healthier?

BY ASSOC PROF DR AMUTHA RAMADAS

The rise of digital tools

Nutrition apps and fitness trackers have become part of everyday life. Many Malaysians now monitor steps, log meals or count calories.

These tools can be helpful. Studies have shown that self-monitoring, such as recording food intake, can increase awareness and support short-term behaviour change. When used wisely, apps can help people identify patterns and set realistic goals.

However, these digital tools have limits.

An app can count calories. It cannot fully interpret culture. It cannot understand that the sambal you added was homemade or that your plate of *nasi kandar* was shared. It cannot explain why two meals with similar calorie counts may differ greatly in fibre content, nutrient density or how full they make you feel.

Digital tools are best viewed as assistants, not absolute authorities.

Navigating the “infodemic”

If apps provide numbers, social media provides plenty of opinions.

Scroll for a few minutes and you might see: A post claiming that cutting out all carbohydrates is the secret to health, a “detox” drink promising to cleanse your system and a dramatic before-and-after transformation attributed to one simple change.

Social media rewards simplicity and certainty. Unfortunately, nutrition science is rarely simple. The World Health Organization has described today's information environment as an “infodemic”. This is an overwhelming mix of accurate and

inaccurate content, making it difficult to distinguish trustworthy advice from misleading claims.

These messages are attractive because they offer clarity in a complicated world, though health rarely works in extremes. When faced with too much conflicting advice, people often default to what is easiest and easiest rarely means healthiest.

What does sensible nutrition look like?

If more information is not automatically helpful, what might be?

First, shift the focus from perfection to patterns.

Health is built on what we do most of the time, not what we eat occasionally. Enjoying *nasi lemak* on a weekend is different from relying on high-fat, high-sugar meals daily.

Second, think beyond calories and focus on quality. Instead of asking only “How many calories is this?” consider:

Does this meal include vegetables? Is there a source of fibre? Am I relying too heavily on sweetened drinks? How often am I eating deep-fried foods?

Third, use digital tools wisely. If you track your meals, treat the data as feedback and not judgment. If a social media post makes bold claims, pause and ask: Is this advice extreme? Is it supported by credible health authorities? Does it align with established dietary guidelines?

Healthy eating in Malaysia does not require abandoning local food culture. It means making thoughtful adjustments within it. Small, consistent changes can have powerful cumulative effects and this might look like:

- Asking for less sugar in drinks
- Choosing water more often than sweetened beverages
- Adding vegetables or *ulam* when possible
- Sharing richer dishes rather than having them individually
- Including more legumes, fish and fruit in weekly meals

Malaysia's nutrition challenge is not due to ignorance or lack of food. It is the result of an environment where high-calorie options are easy, reliable and heavily marketed, while balanced eating requires more conscious effort.

More information alone will not fix this. What will help is clearer guidance, critical thinking and practical strategies that fit real Malaysian lifestyles. The next step is learning how to cut through the noise and return to simple, balanced patterns that nourish rather than overwhelm.

Good health is not built on widely shared online trends or perfectly tracked days. It is built quietly, meal by meal, over time.



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Many Malaysians now use mobile apps and fitness trackers to monitor meals, calories and daily steps.