


**Nutri  
Scene**
**DR TEE E SIONG**

starhealth@thestar.com.my

# Keeping an eye on fast foods

**The Health Ministry is enforcing guidelines for the advertising of fast foods to children and nutrition labelling.**

**N**UTRITION plays a key role in the health of individuals. The prevalence of diseases linked to inappropriate dietary pattern has been on the rise. These diet-related diseases include obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and certain types of cancer.

The authorities have always taken a serious view of the importance of healthy nutrition. For decades, comprehensive nutrition intervention programmes have been implemented to combat these diseases.

The consumption of fast foods is the centre of a new set of guidelines recently introduced by the Ministry of Health (MOH). There are two parts to these Guidelines on fast foods: (a) advertising to children; and (b) labelling of nutrient content.

I would like to highlight these guidelines to all stakeholders to help promote their effective implementation. This would include fast food restaurants, the authorities, relevant health professionals and last, but not least, the consumers.

The following points have been extracted from the document distributed during the launch of these guidelines on December 10, 2007, after the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the National Food Safety and Nutrition Council, Ministry of Health Malaysia.

## Defining fast foods

There is probably no universally accepted definition for the term "fast foods". Used loosely and in a wide sense, it can be taken to mean meals that are served on demand and made available in a short time.

This would include the franchised western-type fast foods as well as local hawker foods.

For the purposes of the proposed guidelines, MOH has defined "fast foods" as "foods that are prepared in large quantities, following standardised procedures and served rapidly in restaurants commonly known as fast food restaurants, which usually advertise their services through the electronic and print media".

## Why the need to regulate advertising of fast foods

The excessive consumption of fast foods has become recognised as one of the risk factors associated with the problem of obesity. Fast foods are said to be commonly high in fat, sugar and salt and low in complex carbohydrates.

Fast food restaurants have spread rapidly throughout the country, even into small towns. This rapid increase in popularity is probably due to the aggressive promotion of these foods by the industry, including through advertising.

The authorities are particularly concerned with advertisements targeted towards children, who are unable to appropriately sieve through food and nutrition messages.

The increasing prevalence of obesity among children is also a main reason for this focus on this vulnerable group. The prevalence of overweight and obesity, reported to be 1% in the 1990s, rose to 6% in 1997 among children 13-17 years.

In a study of primary school-age children in Kuala Lumpur in 2000, I found a prevalence of 8%. There is therefore a need to pay particular attention to this vulnerable group.

Advertising is one of the most popular means used by the food industry to promote their products. Information channelled through the media on various food products,



The excessive consumption of fast foods has become recognised as one of the risk factors associated with the problem of obesity. - AP photo

including innovative food items, special offers and gimmicks have undoubtedly influenced food consumption pattern over the decades.

It is felt that the association between television and the prevalence of obesity among children is linked to the food advertisements. It is recognised that television is an extremely influential medium for children. There is a need to pay particular attention to this medium.

A tighter control of fast foods is deemed necessary because these foods are advertised aggressively over various media, as compared to other foods, eg local hawker dishes. The fast food industry is also a huge industry. The most popular brands are multinational enterprises. These guidelines on fast foods are only the beginning of a more long-term programme that will provide similar control for other food items.

This initial control on television may be extended to advertisements over the radio and also the print media. These guidelines now enforced are said to be similar to actions taken by several European countries to control fast food advertisements.

## Guidelines for advertising to children

The Guidelines now enforced by MOH stipulate that:

1. The fast food industry is prohibited from sponsoring children programmes on television.
2. Advertisements on fast foods are prohibited from being aired during children programmes on television.
3. Fast food advertisements are not permitted to provide nutrition information which may confuse the consumers.
4. Fast food advertisements are not allowed to encourage/promote excessive consumption of fast foods.
5. Fast food advertisements shall not portray fast foods as being able to replace a complete or balanced meal.
6. Fast food advertisements shall not challenge or belittle the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines published by the Ministry of Health Malaysia\*

Children programmes are defined as:

1. Cartoon programmes (animated)
2. Other children programmes (non-animated)

A large proportion of the viewers of such programmes are children between the ages of four to nine years.

The MOH hopes that the proposed control of advertisements for children will be able to complement the existing efforts by the Government to promote a balanced diet. It is hoped that the long-term efforts to promote healthy eating will be effective in reducing the risk of the community towards chronic diseases.

## Nutrition labelling

The second component of the Guidelines officially announced by MOH on December 10, 2007, relate to nutrition labelling of fast foods. These Guidelines have made it mandatory to provide nutrition information on the wrapper, brochure, pamphlet or posters of fast foods. The nutrition information required are:

1. The amount of energy (calories), carbohydrate, fat and protein in these foods, and
  2. Percentage of these nutrients compared to the Recommended Nutrient Intake (RNI)
- For beverages, the amount of sugar in each serving must also be provided. For foods such as fried chicken, burger and French fries, the amount of salt in the food must also be labelled.

The MOH hopes that with the nutrient declaration on the wrappers, brochures or leaflets accompanying the fast food, the consumer will be better informed of the amount of specific nutrients it contains. It is hoped that the consumer will take note of the amount of energy, fat, sugar and salt each food contains.

## Effective implementation

The declaration of the amount of energy and the three macro nutrients (carbohydrate, protein and fat) on labels of processed foods has already been enforced in the country for two years. I would support the extension of this labelling to fast foods. Eventually other restaurant meals can also be encouraged to

provide some nutrient information to better inform their patrons.

I am just a little uncertain of the detailed instructions for the labelling, as these are not clearly provided in the document I have at hand. I will be discussing with MOH on these details. We certainly do not want confusion in the implementation of these guidelines.

These Guidelines are said to be self-regulating, that is to say the fast food industry actively participates in, and is responsible for, its own compliance.

Indeed, it would be rather difficult for the MOH to be policing every guideline and regulation in the country. We ought to have confidence that the fast food industry in the country is mature enough. Furthermore, the consumers can help in the enforcing of such guidelines.

The next time you visit these restaurants, do check out if the food you order is labelled with the required information. You can also watch out if the advertising guidelines are adhered to.

Let us be a more educated consumer. Let us be a more discerning consumer. Let us help the authorities.

Education to consumers on the use of nutrition labelling information must be carried out to ensure effective use of the declaration.

Besides the authorities, professionals and professional bodies should also help in carrying out educational efforts. This can be done together with efforts to help consumers understand labelling information on labels of pre-packaged (processed) foods.

It cannot be overemphasised that the key to effective use of the labelling information is consumer education on proper use. Such information should eventually benefit the consumer, assisting them in the appropriate choice of fast foods.

I do hope that the guidelines on advertising can be extended to other foods commonly consumed by children. There is a whole host of snack foods that are being advertised, targeted at children, especially during primetime children programmes on television.

The marketing of foods to children has attracted a great deal of attention by authorities all over the world. The monograph of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on *Marketing of Food to Children: the Global Regulatory Environment* published in 2004 would be a useful guide on how other authorities are tackling the issue.

Now that these Guidelines have been enforced, all stakeholders should give them a chance to be implemented. Let us all participate in their effective implementation.

\*A simplified version of the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines can be viewed on the official home page of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, [www.nutriweb.org.my](http://www.nutriweb.org.my).

■ *NutriScene* is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail [starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my). The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.