





OVERINDULGENCE HURTS HEARTS

With Christmas just over and the Lunar New Year around the corner, it's easy to get carried away with the endless, mouthwatering spread of festive goodies. But moderation is vital for a healthy heart. We look at how you can tuck in without inducing a coronary.

WORDS

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Two years ago, on the eve of the Lunar New Year, 45-year-old technical supervisor Joseph Tan had a lavish reunion dinner with his family. He spent the rest of the night drinking with friends and returned home at 2am. The first day of the Lunar New Year was spent nibbling on his favourite festive fare, such as *bak kwa* and butter cookies.

The next afternoon, while on the way to visit friends and family, Joseph experienced sudden, crushing chest pains and began sweating profusely while climbing the stairs. He was immediately taken to the hospital, where he underwent an emergency angioplasty, a procedure to widen a constricted blood vessel using a balloon-tipped catheter.

Although Joseph's case of a holiday heart attack is relatively uncommon in Singapore, it is still one that is of concern and one that could be possibly avoided. According to interventional cardiologist Dr Julian Tan, ignorant consumption is the issue. "People often have the tendency to eat and drink in excess during the festive

season," he observes. "Too much carbohydrates or sugars can lead to diabetes, which is a precursor to heart attacks and strokes, and excessive fats lead to accumulation of cholesterol-laden plaque in the inner walls of coronary vessels, which eventually lead to heart attacks. It is important to pay attention to what you are eating as well the quantity."

What too much food and alcohol does to the heart

Special occasions and holidays are times when most of us feel indulgent and eat more than usual. In an interview with *Today* newspaper, Ms Lynette Goh, a senior dietitian with the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, said that it is quite common for people to gain between 500g and 1kg over the Chinese New Year period just from consuming an additional 500 calories each day. According to her, "A bite of *bak kwa*, some pineapple tarts and a few sips of a soft drink can amount to more than 500 calories."

While most people would associate overeating with the stomach, what we eat and how much we eat has a significant impact on

the heart, too. Grim findings of a study reveal that the risk of a heart attack increases by four times in the two hours following a heavy meal. The study, led by Dr Francisco Lopez-Jimenez, a cardiologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, USA, surveyed close to 2,000 people and was released at the American Heart Association's Scientific Session in 2000.

For a start, the heart has to pump harder to assist digestion, and a spike in insulin levels after a large meal can reduce the normal relaxation of the coronary arteries. This means that people with heart conditions should not just watch their daily total caloric intake, but the portions of individual meals as well

The same rule applies to alcohol. Binge drinking, which amounts to four or more drinks for women and five or more for men in a span of two hours, can cause arrhythmias or irregular heart rhythms. Extreme alcohol consumption can lead to cardiomyopathy, or diseases of the heart muscle. With a little self-control, one can still enjoy some festive tipples. "A moderate amount of red wine, which equals to one to two glasses a week, is good for the heart. But, do take note of the word 'moderate,'" reminds Dr Tan.

Heart-healthy holiday feasting

Eating with your heart's health in mind does not necessarily mean you have to give up eating your beloved pineapple tarts or love letters. Here are some simple strategies to prevent you from going overboard with all the delicious excess of the festive season.

• Fill up earlier

Avoid heading for a visit on an empty stomach. Snack on low-fat yoghurt and a piece of fruit to stave off extreme hunger pangs, which can cause overeating. The protein in the yoghurt helps to keep energy levels up, making it easier to keep away from foods high in saturated fat and salt, which can increase blood pressure levels and cholesterol. The fruit adds to your fibre and antioxidant intake.

• Control portion sizes

When it comes to celebratory feasting, one is easily spoilt for choice. Focusing on the quality and not the quantity of food ensures that you still get to enjoy your favourite treats in modest amounts — do resist second helpings!

• Go easy on the fat

For those with an existing heart condition, food



choices naturally have to be wiser. "As we get older, fat and cholesterol can accumulate in our arteries and form plaque, which collects silently over time. Too much saturated fat can also lead to plaque build-up, which could interfere with blood flow. In the event that the build-up ruptures, a clot can travel to the heart or brain and result in a heart attack or stroke," says cardiologist Dr Eric Hong. Selecting foods with healthier fats can help keep cholesterol levels in check and circumvent further heart troubles. For instance, go for baked nuts, seeds and vegetable chips instead of butter-laden cookies and cakes. If you're the host, use healthier oils in your food preparation, such as canola and olive, and avoid any form of deep frying.

• Reduce salt

Sodium is an essential mineral needed for

Avoid heading for a visit on an empty stomach.

optimal physiological functioning. It is easily available in the form of salt. However, too much salt causes fluid retention in the body, and this leads to hypertension or a surge in blood pressure levels. Condiments like stock cubes and bottled seasoning, both of which are used in soups and steamboats, and common New Year snacks such as nuts, chips and *bak kwa*, are best avoided or taken in minimal quantities.

• Limit alcohol intake

Going overboard with alcohol during celebrations does not bode well for your heart. Drinking large amounts of alcohol can bring about heart palpitations, light-headedness and breathing difficulties. Instead, have plain water, sparkling mineral water, unsweetened tea or sugar-free beverages. If you must have that tippie, savour it slowly to make it last longer, and avoid refilling.

Beyond the Lunar New Year

Although food itself is not the sole reason that causes a heart attack, it is important to be attentive to one's own health status and take the necessary preventive measures, not just during the festive season, but all year round.

"In multicultural Singapore, we are blessed to be celebrating many festivals of various ethnic groups, such as Chinese New Year. Eating sweet desserts is encouraged during Chinese New Year due to their symbolism of a sweet life in the coming year," explains Dr Hong. "But, discipline with even the best of homemade pineapple tarts is critical to prevent a surge in sugar levels. For diabetics, it is highly encouraged to moderate the consumption of carbohydrate-rich foods like *nian gao* (sweet rice cake), and long noodles, which represent longevity."

Festive celebrations are meant to be memorable and joyful; with some effort, they can be healthy for the heart, too. According to Dr Hong, moderation is paramount. "People should draw their own boundaries, and be proactive in managing their eating habits. For instance, I would intensify my exercise regime and include more stair climbing or brisk walking to make up for the added calories. These would not only burn calories, but also benefit the heart," he emphasises. 🍵



HEART-FORTIFYING FOODS

Boost your cardiac health with these wholesome inclusions for your Lunar New Year menu. Nibble, have a sip, add them to a stir-fry or simply toss them with a plate of *yu sheng* for added flavour and heart-healthy goodness.

Walnuts and almonds These are packed with protein and omega-3 fatty acids, which promote a healthy heart. Go for the unsalted variety.

Green tea An ideal alternative to sugary beverages, a cup of antioxidant-rich green tea may help control hypertension and reduce blood clots.

Dark chocolate Flavonols in dark chocolate are associated with lowering blood pressure by relaxing arteries and increasing blood flow. Pick a bar that contains at least 70% cocoa.

Blueberries These tiny gems are packed with powerful antioxidants, such as resveratrol and flavonoids, that may help avert coronary disease.

Brussels sprouts The heart-healthy benefits of this vitamin-rich, anti-inflammatory green include enhancing blood vessel health.

Apples The mandarin orange may be the star of the Lunar New Year season, but studies have revealed that an apple a day results in a 40% decrease in low-density lipoprotein (LDL). Also known as bad cholesterol, LDL raises the risk of a heart attack.

Chia seeds Sprinkle just a spoonful of this omega-3 powerhouse to help reduce plaque build-up in the arteries.

Sardines Loaded with omega-3, sardines are said to ease the risk of sudden, recurring heart attacks. Choose fresh ones over the canned variety to reduce sodium overload.



OUR CARDIOLOGISTS



DR ERIC HONG

Dr Eric Hong is a consultant cardiologist at EH Heart Specialist, and a visiting consultant to Mount Alvernia Hospital and Raffles Hospital. His specialities include interventional cardiology, sports cardiology, nuclear cardiology, cardiac rehabilitation and non-invasive cardiac imaging including cardiac CT angiography and PET/SPECT imaging.

He is one of the few cardiologists who holds a double accreditation following his training in two ACGME (Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, USA) clinical fellowships of interventional cardiology and non-invasive cardiac imaging (including cardiac CT angiography, PET/SPECT imaging and nuclear cardiology). Dr Hong is also qualified to perform the up-and-coming renal denervation procedure for hypertension.

Dr Hong is the first Singaporean to be accepted in the clinical programmes at the Department of Cardiology, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, where he was involved in the research and development of the latest cardiovascular imaging modalities, new isotopes and new-generation stents used in interventional cardiology.

Before starting his private practice, Dr Hong served as a consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, where he helped to establish and deliver a 24/7 acute cardiology service for heart attack patients. He was also Clinical Tutor at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS, and Chairman of the NUH Total Lifestyle Connection Club. Over the years, he has been the recipient of several service excellence awards.

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DR JULIAN TAN

Running his own private practice, Julian Tan Heart Specialist Clinic, since 2015, Dr Julian Tan's proficiency lies in all aspects of interventional cardiology, including complex bifurcation and CTO interventions.

During his stint at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, he was Principal Investigator of many multinational clinical trials and Co-investigator in many landmark trials. He has contributed articles to peer-reviewed journals and has been invited to lecture in regional and international cardiology conferences.

Dr Tan is a Clinical Senior Lecturer at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS; a Clinical Teacher at the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, NTU; and a Core Clinical Faculty Member of the NHG Cardiology Senior Residency Program. Dr Tan was conferred MOH's Healthcare Manpower Development Plan scholarship to pursue fellowship training in Interventional Cardiology at the Alfred Heart Centre and Epworth Hospital in Melbourne, Australia.

Besides complex percutaneous coronary interventions, he performs peripheral endovascular interventions and renal nerve denervation, and structural heart interventions (transcatheter aortic valve replacement, patent foramen ovale/atrial septal defects closures, left atrial appendage occluder, balloon aortic and mitral valvuloplasties).

Dr Tan's areas of interest include the performing of complex percutaneous coronary intervention, namely bifurcation coronary intervention and chronic total occlusion intervention.

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