

Non-Communicable Diseases Watch

February 2021



Have a Healthier Chinese New Year

Key Messages

- ※ Chinese New Year is the season brimming with many festive treats and feasts which are high in energy, fat, salt or sugar. Excessive consumption along with insufficient physical activity, Chinese New Year could be a risky period for weight gain.
- ※ To achieve optimal nutrition and weight control, the Department of Health (DH) appeals members of the public to eat according to the “Healthy Eating Food Pyramid” guide with a wide variety of foods in the right proportions and to observe the following basic principles: limit foods high in fat, salt and sugar; consume enough dietary fibre with at least 2 servings of fruit and at least 3 servings of vegetables per day; make healthier beverage choices and avoid alcohol.
- ※ To burn off the extra calories gained from festive eating, members of the public are urged to do more physical activity. In the wake of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), they can do home-based exercises, carry out household chores or join online exercise classes. Members of the public should also limit the amount of time spent being sedentary and replace sedentary time with physical activity of any intensity.
- ※ Let's celebrate this festive season by healthy eating and staying physically active.

Have a Healthier Chinese New Year

Chinese New Year is the season brimming with various festive treats and feasts, from melon seeds (such as red and black), nuts (such as pistachios, cashews and walnuts) and candied foods (such as candied lotus roots, candied lotus seeds and candied winter melon) placed in the snack box ('chuen haap'), to crunchy fried foods (such as crispy triangles, sesame seed balls and crispy egg floss), mouth-watering New Year puddings (including sweetened rice pudding and water chestnut pudding, savory turnip pudding and taro pudding), as well as irresistible 'poon Choi' (comprising mostly meat and seafood), etc. As many of these traditional festive foods are high in energy, fat, salt or sugar, Chinese New Year could be a risky period for weight gain (and digestive discomfort such as indigestion, bloating and abdominal pain, etc).

Festive Fat Trap

When faced with tempting Chinese New Year favourites, many people would lose sight of the 'three low and one high' (i.e. low fat, low sugar, low salt and high fiber) rule and have a higher caloric intake. Without sufficient physical activity, people can pack on half kilogram (kg) or one pound (lb) within a week by consuming an additional 500 calories (kcal) of food intake per day (an equivalent of about 3 pieces of 80 grams (g) pan-fried water chestnut pudding or pan-fried turnip pudding, together with 3 pieces of 14 g crispy triangles). Studies found that adults would increase in body weight between 0.5–0.9 kg during the festive or holiday season (starting from the last week of November to the first or second week of January).^{1,2} The amount of festive or holiday weight gain may seem trivial, however, such additional weight is likely to retain and accumulate; not many people can shed those extra kilos in the following months.^{3,4} Since the fundamental cause of weight gain is an imbalance between calories intake

from foods as well as beverages and energy expenditure in normal body functions along with daily activities, healthy eating and staying physically active are the key to reduce the risk of unhealthy weight gain when celebrating Chinese New Year.

Healthy Eating Tips for Chinese New Year

As members of the public may not dine out in restaurants these days in response to combat the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), they could readily take charge of what exactly goes into their festive meals (such as the Family Reunion Dinner on the New Year's Eve and New Year Feast on the second day of the New Year) by preparing the food on their own. To achieve optimal nutrition and control weight, the Department of Health (DH) appeals members of the public to eat according to the "Healthy Eating Food Pyramid" guide with a wide variety of foods in right proportions⁵ and to observe the following basic principles:

✓ *Limit foods high in fat, salt and sugar*

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that adults in general should limit total fat intake to less than 30% of total energy intake. While intake of saturated fat (such as from fatty meat) should be limited to less than 10% of total energy intake, total intake of trans fat (such as from fried foods) should be limited to less than 1% of total energy intake. For salt (or sodium) intake, healthy adults should consume below 5 g of salt (or 2 g of sodium) per day; children should consume less salt than adults. Sugars intake should be reduced to less than 10% of total energy intake (a further reduction to less than 5% of total energy intake is suggested for additional health benefits).⁶ Table 1 shows the daily upper limit of fat/oil, salt and sugar intakes for a person consuming 2 000 kcal per day.

Table 1: Daily upper limit of fat, salt and sugar intakes for a diet of 2 000 kcal per day

Substance	Daily intake upper limit
Total fat/Oil	60 g (equivalent to 4 tablespoons of oil)
♦ Saturated fat	♦ 20 g
♦ Trans fat	♦ 2.2 g
Salt	5 g (equivalent to 1 level teaspoon of salt or 2 tablespoons of soy sauce)
Sugars	50 g (equivalent to 10 teaspoons of sugars or 10 sugar cubes)

Note: 1 teaspoon = 5 milliliter (ml); 1 tablespoon = 15 ml.

Below are some eating tips on reducing fat, salt and sugar intakes from festive foods when celebrating Chinese New Year —

- ◇ Limit the intake of fried Chinese New Year festive foods. Apart from high in fat, some also contain high levels of sugar or sodium. Choose crispy and relatively low-fat items as alternatives, such as rice crackers and rice cakes.
- ◇ Melon seeds and nuts are relatively high in fat and some of them have added salt or sugar. Choose those that are dry-roasted without added salt or sugar as healthier options, but they should be consumed only in moderation.
- ◇ Take Chinese puddings as treats and they should not replace main meals. Sweetened puddings are often loaded with sugar, while turnip pudding and taro pudding are usually made with high-fat ingredients (such as Chinese preserved sausages and preserved meat). Use healthier ingredients when making savory New Year puddings at home, such as lean pork, dried shrimps and mushrooms instead of fat meat and Chinese preserved meat. When buying prepackaged festive puddings, read the nutrition labels for healthier choices and choose low-sugar sweetened pudding. Reheat or cook festive puddings by steaming or using microwave oven as far as possible. When pan-frying, consider using non-sticky pan to reduce the amount of oil. Avoid or reduce the use of condiments and sauce (such as chilli sauce and XO sauce) when eating turnip pudding and taro pudding.
- ◇ Limit the intake of fatty meat and some conventional dishes cooked to celebrate Chinese New Year, such as pork briskets, trotters, chicken's feet, roasted meat, Chinese preserved sausages and preserved meat. For example, two pieces of trotters (total about 140 g) with one piece of Chinese sausage (45 g) will contain around 38 g (about 2.5 tablespoons) of fat. Choose lean meat or other meat with lower fat content, such as fish, seafood and dried seafood (including sea cucumbers and dried scallops), and consume them only in moderation. Trim off all visible fats from fatty meat and remove skin from poultry before consumption as far as possible.
- ◇ Use healthier cooking methods when preparing home-made festive meals (including the family Reunion Dinner and the New Year Feast), such as steaming, boiling in stock or water, stewing, braising, air-frying and stir-frying with little amount of oil instead of deep-frying and pan-frying to reduce intake of fat. To favour food, use natural ingredients and spices (such as ginger, garlic, coriander, Sichuan pepper, five-spice powder and pepper) in place of high-salt and high-fat condiments (such as chili oil, chu hou sauce and red fermented bean curd).

✓ *Consume enough dietary fibre*

Dietary fibre is mainly found in fruit, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains. It contributes to a healthy digestive system and offers a prolonged feeling of fullness that helps prevent overeating. To ensure an adequate daily intake of dietary fibre and reduce the risk of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCD), DH recommends adults and adolescents aged 12–17 in general to consume at least 2 servings of fruit and at least 3 servings of vegetables per day (which is in line with WHO recommendation of having at least 5 servings of about 80 g each a day⁶). However, the Health Behaviour Survey 2018/19 of DH observed that over 90% of persons aged 15 and above had inadequate consumption of fruit and vegetables.⁷

Below are some eating tips on increasing intake of dietary fibre during Chinese New Year:

- ◇ Add vegetables, gourds, mushrooms, cloud ear fungus, beans and legumes in dishes and soups.
- ◇ Have fresh fruit as desserts. Enjoy fruit (such as apple, pear and grape) with skin, whenever possible.
- ◇ Eat whole fruit and vegetables instead of fruit and vegetable juices.
- ◇ Choose fresh fruit or dried fruit without added sugar, dry-roasted plain nuts as snacks, instead of festive fried foods.

✓ *Make healthier beverage choices and avoid alcohol*

Sweetened beverages are also important sources of unwanted calories when celebrating Chinese New Year. For example, 1 can (330 ml) of soda (such as cola and cream soda) or juice drink (such as orange juice drink and grape juice drink) contains about 30–43g of sugar and provide about 140–190 kcal.⁸ To reduce sugar intake, people can choose plain water as the main drink. Add slices of fruit (e.g. lemon, lime and strawberry) or herbs (e.g. mint and lemongrass) can enhance taste. Plain tea has minimal calorie and contains antioxidants (such as tea polyphenols) that are beneficial for health. However, tea also contains caffeine that overconsumption would affect sleep. So, it should be consumed in moderation.

Alcoholic beverages are extremely calorific with 7 kcal per gram of alcohol (second highest next to fat). For 1 can of beer with 330 ml and 5% alcohol by volume, it would have about 140 kcal. Cocktails mixed with soda, juice, cream or ice cream usually have higher calorie counts. Apart from contributing to weight gain, alcohol reduces people's inhibitions that may lead to regrettable drunken acts (such as arguments, fights or other disorderly conducts in public places). Drinking too much too quickly can also result in acute alcoholic intoxication. For drinking parents, they should serve as role model by not drinking (especially in front of children and adolescents). When celebrating Chinese New Year, members of the public can opt for non-alcoholic beverages (such as Chinese tea and sparkling mineral water).

Be Physically Active during Chinese New Year

Apart from unhealthy eating, inadequate physical activity is another major reason for people putting on weight after the festive or holiday season. Among persons aged 18 and above, the Health Behaviour Survey 2018/19 found that 16.8% of them had insufficient physical activity.⁷ To maintain health when celebrating Chinese New Year or burn off the extra calories gained from festive eating, members of the public are urged to do more physical activity.

For all adults aged 18 and above, including those living with chronic conditions or disability, WHO recommends that:

- ◆ They should undertake regular physical activity;
- ◆ They should do at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity; or at least 75–150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity; or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity throughout the week, for substantial health benefits;
- ◆ They may increase moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity to more than 300 minutes; or do more than 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity; or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity throughout the week for additional health benefits;
- ◆ They should also do muscle-strengthening activities at moderate or greater intensity that involve all major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week, as these provide additional health benefits;
- ◆ For older adults aged 65 and above (including those living with chronic conditions or disability), as part of their weekly physical activity, they should also do varied multicomponent physical activity that emphasises functional balance and strength training at moderate or greater intensity, on 3 or more days a week, to enhance functional capacity and to prevent falls.⁹

For healthy children and adolescents aged 5–17, WHO recommends that:

- ◆ They should do at least an average of 60 minutes per day of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity, mostly aerobic, across the week;
- ◆ Vigorous-intensity aerobic activity, as well as those that strengthen muscle and bone, should be incorporated at least 3 days a week, as these provide additional health benefits.⁹

Even low-intensity physical activity (such as standing, casual walking, cooking and washing dishes) has health benefits. Studies show that short bouts of light physical activity can enable body metabolise fat in a healthy way and help control postprandial glycaemia.^{10, 11} In the wake of COVID-19, members of the public are urged to go out less and stay at home as far as possible. To stay physically active while staying at home, members of the public can do home-based exercises (such as squats, knee to elbow, running on the spot, dance with music, etc.), carry out household chores (such as mopping floor, scrubbing bathroom or kitchen, making beds and changing linens, etc.) or join online exercise classes.

Too much sedentary behaviour can be unhealthy too. Members of the public should limit the amount of time spent being sedentary and replace sedentary time with physical activity of any intensity (including light intensity).⁹ They can stand or step on the spot while watching television, do toe lifts or pace around while talking on the phone, stand up while performing other sit-down tasks, or do leg raise or ankle rotation exercise as often as possible while sitting.

Let's celebrate this festive season by healthy eating and staying physically active. Wish you a happy, healthy New Year!

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Let's Get Physical

The Department of Health (DH) produced two television announcements in the public interests (APIs) which aim to raise public awareness of the recommended amount of physical activity, encourage members of the public to exercise regularly as well as promulgate the environmental co-benefits of physical activity. Such APIs has scheduled for broadcast through television, MTR in-train and trackside televisions starting from 27 January 2021. Please pay attention!



To encourage members of the public to do more physical activities, DH also produced a number of exercise demonstration videos for different settings, including the Household Fitness Dance that can be viewed at the Change of Health website of DH at www.change4health.gov.hk/en/resources/av_gallery/index.html. Let's get physical for health!

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) WATCH is dedicated to promote public's awareness of and disseminate health information about non-communicable diseases and related issues, and the importance of their prevention and control. It is also an indication of our commitments in responsive risk communication and to address the growing non-communicable disease threats to the health of our community. The Editorial Board welcomes your views and comments. Please send all comments and/or questions to so_dp3@dh.gov.hk.

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