

# Debunking myths: Can spicy foods increase our metabolic rate?

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**PETALING JAYA:** Spices are Malaysians' must-have condiment in their meals.

Our nasi lemak is incomplete without the sambal and our chicken rice would feel lonely without the chilli paste.

But besides the enjoyable kick that spices give us, it is also true that they increase our metabolic rate.

However, before anyone should ladle more chilli flakes onto their food in order to lose a few pounds, it should be said that spices increase our metabolism only by a relatively small percentage.

There have been studies that indicate that eating spicy foods can boost our metabolism, but not in the way that would aid effectively in our battle for weight loss.

Malaysian Dietitians' Association president Professor Winnie Chee explained that a person's total daily energy expenditure (TDEE) is composed of a few distinct components.

"The thermic effect of food (TEF), which is the energy produced from the digestion of foods, make up only 10% of the TDEE," she said.

"The other component is movement and physical activity, which takes up around another 10-20% of our TDEE.

"The largest component, resting energy expenditure (REE), refers to the basal metabolic rate (BMR), which takes up 70% of our TDEE," said Prof Chee, who is also Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at International Medical University.

The BMR, according to NHS Choices UK, refers to the minimum amount of energy the body requires to carry out the chemical processes that occur in our bodies.

According to Prof Chee, certain ingredients in food such as spices, caffeine, green tea and essence of chicken have indeed been shown to induce an increase in the thermic effects of foods.

However, the effects are not so significant as to facilitate dramatic weight loss.

"Some studies show that consumption of spices can increase TEF by around 8%.

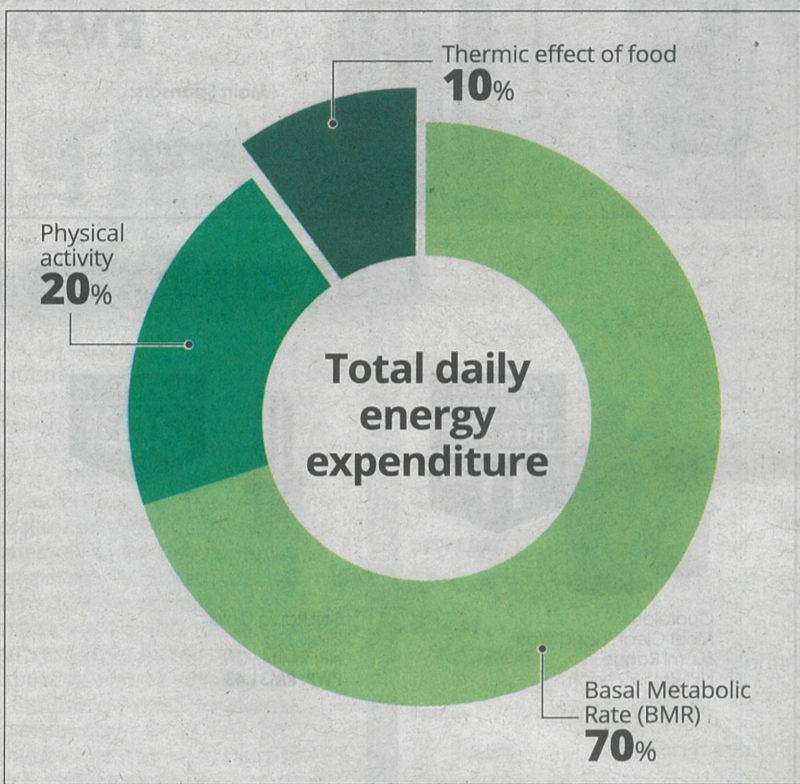
"This means, if an average Malaysian adult expends about 2,000 kcals a day, eating spices can increase this energy expenditure by 100-160 kcals a day, which is the equivalent to about two spoonfuls of rice," she said.

Prof Chee explained that while certain foods can increase a person's metabolic rate, weight loss only occurs when energy expenditure is higher than energy intake.

"Eating foods which increase metabolic rates may be helpful provided it is not offset by high energy intake overall in a day.

"The contribution of increased energy expenditure from spices is small, compared to a whole day's energy expenditure.

"Let's not forget that Malaysians love to cook spices in the form of curries, which can be fat-laden and high in calories!" she said.



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Thus, while one does work out a sweat slurping down delicious curry, nothing beats actual physical exercise when it comes to burning calories.

Prof Chee said that the best way to increase metabolism to lose weight is by aiming to increase the rate of the largest component of our TDEE – the basal metabolic rate.

"A person's basal metabolic rate is contributed by muscle mass, so exercising is the best way to lose weight as it will increase muscle mass, reduce body fat, and increase energy expenditure," she advised.

According to Dr Tee E Siong, president of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, "Metabolism is indeed linked to body weight. However, it does not necessarily mean that a person with slow metabolism will become overweight and obese."

"Excessive weight gain is a complicated process, involving a number of factors, like genetic makeup, hormonal controls, and several lifestyle factors such as type of diet practised, physical activity, stress, and even sleep," he said.

"There are indeed certain foods that may increase metabolism, like chilli, various spices, whole grains such as oat, whole meal wheat and

## 3 most effective ways of burning calories

### Aerobic exercise

- Walking, cycling, swimming
- Aim to do at least 150 minutes a week



### Strength training

- Muscle strengthening activities, like lifting weights or push-ups
- Aim to work all major muscle groups two or more times a week



### Be active

- Take the stairs instead of the lift, exercise during lunch breaks
- Incorporate being active into your daily routine!



Source: NHS Choices UK

brown rice.

"However, just relying on the consumption of these foods alone to achieve significant and sustainable weight loss is highly unlikely," he said.

Dr Tee said that to have sustainable and healthy weight loss, one must adhere to reliable methods.

"The most trusted and effective method would be to follow the dietary guidelines and adopt a healthy eating habit," he said.

Dr Tee advocates doing regular exercise to shed weight. Getting enough sleep and drinking enough water are also important.

Most importantly, one needs a lot of willpower and inner motivation in order to achieve weight loss.