

5 THINGS ABOUT... **MALA**

The hottest food trend has been, well, a hot one. But go easy on the *mala*, especially if you are watching your weight or have a sensitive tummy.

In consultation with Ms Seow Vi Vien, Dietitian, Nutrition & Dietetics, KTPH

The addictive tingle and burn of the Szechuan pepper can be found in everything from hotpot to potato chips these days. While the spice can add an intoxicating kick to your meal, Ms Seow Vi Vien, Dietitian, KTPH, highlights five important things to note even as you get your *mala* (麻辣) on.

1 SPICY FOOD IS GOOD FOR YOU...

Spicy foods such as chillies are concentrated sources of fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Capsaicin, the chemical compound that gives spicy food its punch, is also associated with small increases in temperature and metabolism. Some studies indicate a positive correlation between spice-heavy diets and longevity. A 2015 study by a group of researchers for China Kadoorie Biobank observed that spicy food consumption was inversely associated with the risks of death due to cancer, ischaemic

heart diseases, and respiratory diseases. Another study in 2017 by the University of Vermont found a 13% lower risk of death among chilli lovers and lower rates of inflammatory disease.

2...TO AN EXTENT

However, it is important to note that more research is needed to confirm the benefits of spicy foods such as *mala*. Many of the benefits do not translate in realistic terms. For instance, spicy foods alone are not significant sources of nutrients, and have to be eaten in substantial amounts to confer meaningful benefits. And although there are qualitative reports suggesting that spicy foods may boost metabolism and support weight loss, the evidence to date is insufficient to warrant eating spicy food as a feasible way to lose weight.

3 THERE MAY BE MORE CALORIES THAN THE SPICE IS WORTH

The nutrition and benefits of spicy food can also be outweighed by the way that *mala* food is prepared. Many of such dishes are cooked in a sauce that contains a large quantity of sugar, salt and oil. Compared to fresh chilli, this spicy sauce is a lot more calorie-laden — a typical meal can easily exceed the recommended daily sodium intake. In addition, the spicy sauce may not be as healthful compared to fresh chilli [refer to sidebar]. The China Kadoorie Biobank study compared the disease rate of fresh chilli and non-fresh chilli eaters, and found that death due to cancer, diabetes and heart disease was lower among the group who predominantly ate unprocessed chillies.

4 TOO HOT TO HANDLE

If you have gastritis, irritable bowel syndrome, acid reflux or stomach ulcer, excessively spicy food can make the problem worse. While spicy foods do not cause ulcers or refluxes, they can irritate the stomach and gut, increasing the severity of symptoms. Over-spicy foods can also cause diarrhoea in those not used to eating such dishes.

5 SPICE THINGS UP - IN MODERATION

There are ways to spice up your meal without going overboard. Use fresh chillies and low-sodium soy sauce in moderation, or use *mala* spices in soup rather than in a sauce. You can also add a dash of hot sauce, or sprinkle chilli flakes or ground cayenne pepper for a lower-calorie option to sodium-, sugar- and oil-laden sauces.



Mala Xiang Guo seasoning (per 100g)	Chilli sauce with oil (per 100g)	Fried sambal with oil (per 100g)	Fresh-cut chilli (per 100g)
			
Calories 670 kcal	Calories 864 kcal	Calories 280 kcal	Calories 40 kcal
Fat 79 g	Fat 75 g	Fat 21.2 g	Fat 0.4 g
Sodium 2,627 mg	Sodium 2,592 mg	Sodium 73 mg	Sodium 0 mg