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Shopping with nutrition in mind

In some instances, frozen produce can be cheaper than fresh, but questions arise if there is any difference in its nutritional value. So is it possible to find good nutrition on a budget?

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WITH rising food prices, consumers are now looking for ways to get the most out of their ringgit. Malaysians have the choice of buying either fresh or frozen produce, and depending on the product, frozen foods are sometimes priced lower than fresh foods.

What the consumer will not know is if the reduction in their grocery bill is mirrored by a reduction in the nutritional value of the food. Unwilling to take the chance, consumers may choose to pay a little more on fresh produce for peace of mind.

Dr Zalilah Mohd Shariff, associate professor with the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Universiti Putra Malaysia, says fresh foods are usually considered to have the most nutritional value.

"However, some frozen foods like peas and corn can be more nutritious than fresh ones because they are often picked ripe and quickly frozen. Nutrients can be lost in the time between harvest and consumption, but both fresh and frozen foods can be good food choices in our diets," she states.

Dr Tee E Siong, the Nutrition Society of Malaysia president, agrees, saying that frozen foods are acceptable for consumption.

"There may be a decline in some vitamins in frozen foods, but the other nutrients are generally the same. They are useful alternatives that we can rely on in a hectic lifestyle like ours," he says.

In certain cases, however, frozen food may be preferred.

Mary Easaw John, senior manager at Institut Jantung Negara's Dietetics and Food Services says: "Freezing food is a common method of preservation that slows down food decay. Additionally, turning water to ice makes it unavailable for bacterial growth and slows down most chemical reactions.

"Nutritional values are usually preserved. Fresh green leafy vegetables can last for two days and after that they lose vitamins and minerals," she informs.

Zalilah adds: "Several nutrients that are reported to be sensitive to heat, light or cold are protein, vita-

min A, vitamin C, B vitamins and folate. There may be losses of certain nutrients like vitamin C and folate during the freezing process. Provided the frozen vegetables are stored and then cooked properly, they can provide similar levels of nutrition as fresh vegetables."

But she prefers to go for fresh foods whenever possible.

"I personally feel that one should go for fresh produce first and frozen foods are second choice. We can include frozen vegetables in our diet as an alternative. But then again, you do not see them much in grocery stores here."

As for canned foods, Tee notes, "Canned meats and the like do provide reasonable nutrition and can be used occasionally. They do provide useful alternatives and in general they are safe for consumption too."

But there may be less nutritional value. "The canning process involves heating to kill off bacteria,

for example, but heat sensitive and water soluble nutrients like vitamins A and C can be reduced," Zalilah explains.

Canned foods like curry, vegetables or sardines have high sodium content, canned fruits in syrup are high in sugar, or there is too much fat in cream-based soups or coconut milk-based dishes, she adds.

"These are the nutrients that consumers should be aware of when including canned or instant foods in their diet. Having too much sugar and fat will contribute to unnecessary calories in our diets," she warns.

It has been reported that people in the low-income group tend to eat sparingly with few side dishes, for example eating only salted fish with rice.

Tee says this is not the right way to eat: "The intake from such meals would mainly be energy with little protein, vitamins and minerals. Salted fish alone cannot be a source of protein because it is too salty to eat much of it."

Easaw John believes the key is

educating the lower-income group about cheap yet nutritious foods like tofu, eggs, green leafy vegetables, *ulam* (salads), dhal, and tempe.

She gives the example of a programme in the Philippines where poor people were given seeds and pots to grow their own tomatoes, papayas, greens and chillies. "In this way they overcame the deficiency in vitamin A, iron and vitamin C," she says.

Zalilah understands the plight of the lower-income groups, saying, "Healthier foods like whole grain breads and products, reduced starch rice, fruits, vegetables and fish are more expensive."

But this should not be an impediment to healthy eating, she says.

"Malaysia is blessed with many fruits and vegetables that are both seasonal or available all-year round - *rambutan*, bananas, certain varieties of mangoes, jackfruit, *cempedak*, *pucuk paku* (wild fern shoots), and other *ulam*. Foods are usually cheap if they are in season."

With the worldwide shortage in rice, Agriculture and Agro-Based minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed has announced that the government is calling for a reduction in the consumption of rice.

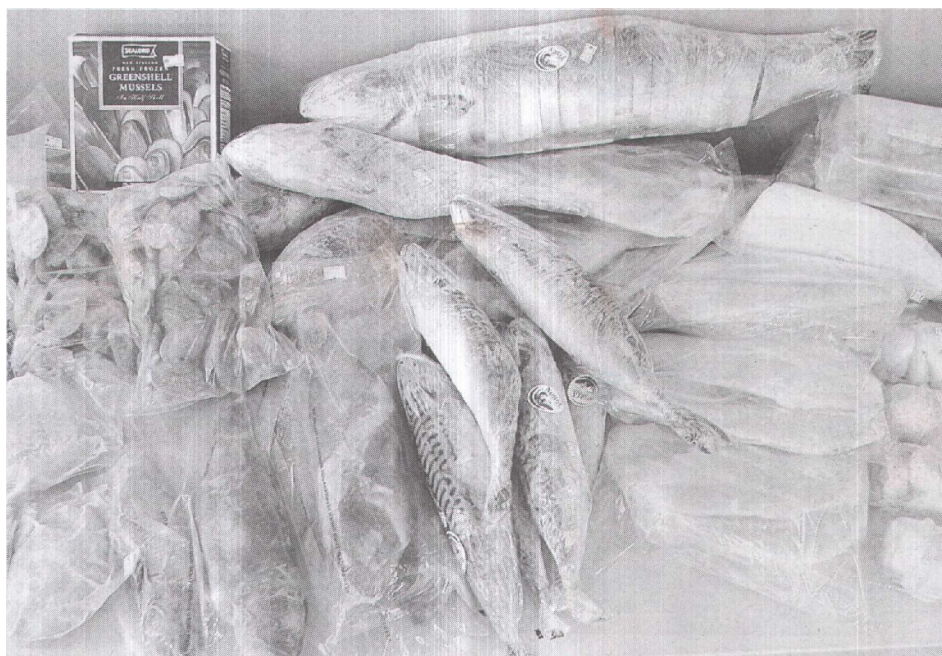
As Tee views it, "The call is not for Malaysians to sleep on an empty stomach. The suggestion is to rely less on rice and substitute part of the rice with similar foods such as the various complex carbohydrates like sweet potatoes or yam."

Zalilah feels that the government's call may not be a bad thing. "Efforts to reduce rice consumption by Malaysians may indeed have health benefits as rice is usually accompanied by many foods that are high in fat and sodium. So, reducing consumption of rice may also result in decreased consumption of high fat foods."

Generally, Zalilah believes that many Malaysians do not eat nor live right.

She advises, "Read the food labels, cut down on the refined and processed products like cakes, nuggets or French fries and go with fresh foods like fruits or vegetables and whole grain products. Moderation, variety and balance are important in our diet."

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Cheaper alternative: The Nutrition Society of Malaysia believes that frozen foods are acceptable for consumption and are as nutritious as fresh produce.

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DR TEE E SIONG

