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The bone girl

To stay fit for action, Malaysian-born Hollywood star Datuk Michelle Yeoh makes no bones about the importance of bone health.

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WHICH body part does an internationally acclaimed action movie star worry about most at the age of 46?

Crows-feet around the eyes, cellulite or the muffin top developing above hip-hugging jeans?

If you are referring to Malaysian-born Hollywood action movie star Datuk Michelle Yeoh, the answer is none of the above.

"My biggest concern, really, is my bone. Because it is the key structure of my body - apart from my brain,

that is," says Yeoh in her usual witty manner when we met her recently in Malaysia.

"The bones - the skeleton - are the core of our body. And if they are not healthy, they will fall apart. If you can't have healthy bones, how else can you be healthy?" she says.

Growing up with health-conscious parents, Yeoh's concerns about bone health can be traced to her childhood.

"Since young my parents have educated us well, especially on having a healthy diet. So, we are not picky eaters," says Yeoh, who eats everything except foods laden with cholesterol and fat.

Amidst the broccoli, cabbage and local fruits that she loves, her daily diet includes at least a glass of milk as her source of calcium. "I remember when I was young my mother used to chase me around the room just to make sure I drank my milk.

"I think a lot of people think that when you stop being babies you don't need your calcium and milk any more, but my mother was very persistent," she says.

In fact, it was also her mother who introduced her to the health benefits of drinking milk during the height of her career. "As you know, I like to do my own stunts. For that, I need strong bones. That is why I pay particular attention to my daily calcium intake."

However, women like Yeoh in Malaysia are rare. Findings from a joint research by University Putra Malaysia and the University of Otago, New Zealand, revealed that most Malaysian women consume less than 50% of their daily recommended calcium intake, which currently is between 800 and 1,000mg/day for women above 19.

This is a worrying trend as the lack of calcium intake may increase women's risk of developing osteoporosis when they age, notes dietitian Aaron Lambert. "Prevention is key for minimising the impact of osteoporosis," he adds.

That is why for Yeoh, raising public awareness on bone health is vital.

While she rejoices at the abundance of healthy food available in Malaysia, Yeoh notes that not too long ago, barring infant years and early childhood, milk is not part of the Malaysian diet compared to places like Europe and the US. But now, Malaysians are increasingly harnessing the benefits of this calcium source.

Asked whether she is lactose intolerant, Yeoh gamely quips, "I don't think I was ever lactose intolerant. A lot of people think they are, but it is bad for you to just assume that you are before even trying."

According to Lambert, very few people actually have total lactose intolerance. "Normally, what they have is malabsorption. By taking small portions of milk, you can overcome this as you consume less lactose at one time."

However, couch potatoes who

meet their daily requirement of calcium intake may find their bone health regime less than ideal. As weight bearing exercises such as low-impact aerobics and walking has been shown to enhance bone growth, exercise is also vital in the development of strong bones.

And if being time-poor in the rat race is your reason not to get on that treadmill, much can be learnt from Yeoh, who slips in exercises whenever she can throughout the day.

"The first thing in the morning ... when I wake up, I go through the whole routine of my exercises which I've incorporated into my lifestyle," says Yeoh.

Her day starts with her stretches even before she leaves her bed and brushes her teeth. "There are certain core exercises that you can do when you are still half asleep.

"When I'm brushing my teeth I do my leg-lifts ... and I exercise throughout the day, sometimes even when I am doing a long phone interview," she adds.

Recently named as the brand ambassador for a milk product, Yeoh aims to enlighten women in Malaysia about bone health. "Where (bone) health is concerned, ignorant is not bliss. It is important and we must do something about it. What is the point of living a long life if you can't have a good quality of life?"

"The thing is, you must listen to your body, because only you can hear it. Only then can you adjust and accommodate to your greatest (health) needs," she says.



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