

3 Tips for Reversing Pandemic Weight Gain



The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has adversely interrupted many of our daily routines. Research has shown that, although the pandemic has marginally improved eating behaviour, one-third of participants gained weight as a result of a significant decline in physical activity, and a dramatic increase in time spent in front of a screen. Hence, many Hongkongers have experienced weight gain over the past year. Fortunately, by utilizing below sensible lifestyle and dietary change recommendations from a Dietitian, the problem of “Pandemic Weight Gain” can be reversed.

Smart choices for takeaways

While many people were working from home and schools were suspended during the pandemic, ordering takeaways has been the most convenient and preferred method of meal selection for many people. Takeaway food can be fattening due to its high fat content. Apart from avoiding sauces and choosing lower-calorie food choices such as soup noodles and salads, fat content in different cuts of meat can vary greatly. For beef, the parts with the highest fat content are brisket, rib, and rib eye which can range from 22-26% fat, compared with round, chuck, tenderloin, or sirloin which only contain about 4-9%. With pork, the leanest parts are the leg, blade shoulder or loin which comprise about 5-12% fat. One might think the fattest cut of pork to be the pork belly since it contains over 50% fat. Surprisingly,

the part with the highest fat content is actually pork cheek, with nearly 70% fat!!! It would be wise to avoid choosing these two parts when ordering pork dishes. For poultry, the part with the least calories undoubtedly is chicken breast (less than 4% fat). For those who prefer to eat dark meat (meaning with a higher iron content), chicken thigh without skin would be a good alternative. It is more tender while holding just less than 6% of fat. Undoubtedly, chicken skin is mainly saturated fats, which are not healthy, so should always be trimmed off before consuming. As it is hard to remove all the skin from chicken wings, their fat content is five times higher than that of chicken breast, so it is best to avoid this part of the chicken altogether!

For a more balanced diet, we recommend to always include some vegetables in your diet. Regrettably, even vegetables from takeaway meals can be fattening. Vegetables are generally high in fibre while low in calories; however, takeaway vegetable dishes might be cooked with a lot of oil and seasonings, which will greatly increase their caloric content. Not only that, they may also be high in sodium. For example, eggplants have only 26kcal per 100g, but the same quantity of braised eggplant prepared with salt fish and minced pork has about 6 times more calories (about 150kcal) with 2-3 teaspoons oil. The sodium content of just this one dish can easily exceed the daily allowance for an adult. Healthier options for vegetables are blanched vegetables without soy or oyster sauce, or salad, either with vinegar or without dressing. Vegetables in broth are also an excellent choice.

Healthy cooking tips

As the coronavirus pandemic presses on, Hongkongers have settled into routines that involve a lot more home cooking. Just because you are logging more hours in the kitchen does not guarantee that your cooking will be healthier and lighter in calories. It will depend on your cooking methods, and how much oil and seasonings are being used as well. To reduce the consumption of oil, steaming, blanching, baking, grilling, microwaving or stir frying with non-stick pans are better cooking methods. Using cooking spray is another good way to reduce the use of oil. Try using healthier fats such as olive oil, grapeseed oil, sunflower oil, linseed oil, soybean oil or rice bran oil in your cuisine. Having said that, one has to watch the total quantity being used as although those oils contain mainly healthier

unsaturated fatty acids, their calories are the same as other unhealthy fats such as butter and lard. Consuming too much can easily lead to weight gain. Hence, it is still important to control the amount used and the optimal amount per meal is up to 2 teaspoons if the person is trying to lose weight.

High sodium or salt intake not only increases the chance of hypertension, it may also lead to water retention in the body and in turn may adversely affect weight. Salt, soy sauce, oyster sauce, black bean paste, fish sauce and other ready-to-use sauces are generally high in sodium. According to the WHO, the daily sodium intake allowance for adults is 2000mg, which is less than 1 teaspoon of salt. Opt for natural herbs and spices like garlic, ginger, pepper, rosemary, basil, parsley, turmeric, star anise, chili, and lemon grass. They can enhance the flavour of food while reducing the chance of using other high sodium seasonings. Lemon juice, lime juice and vinegar are first-rate picks for making your own salad sauce and dressing!

General tips on healthy food choices

Nuts, seeds, and avocado are wholesome food items packed with fibre, vitamin E, and other antioxidants. However, they are high in fat which in turn means more calories. Avocado is over 70% fat by calories. An average sized avocado has the caloric equivalent of a bowl of rice, with 4-5 teaspoons of fat. Nuts like almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, cashews, and macadamia nuts are loaded with magnesium and are good sources of plant-based protein, but a serving of 4-6 nuts have about 4-5g fat which equates to about 1 teaspoon of oil. It is therefore sensible to have one to two servings of nuts a day to get the nutrients one needs but to avoid eating too many of them. Always choose unsalted and unflavoured ones.

Fighting off hunger is a great challenge for many wanting to lose weight. Selecting food that is high in fibre while low in calories is key to feeling full and satisfied during the weight loss period. Fill your plate with plenty of vegetables like choi sum, kale, cucumber, celery, cabbage, mushroom or capsicum. These greatly increase the fibre in your diet without being too high in calories. Mix and match vegetables of different colours to provide a wide variety of nutrients and flavours in your diet. Wholegrains such as oats, buckwheat, barley, quinoa, teff and starchy vegetables like potatoes, sweet potatoes and yams are high in fibre and are

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more satiable compared to white rice, congee, white bread, and other refined carbohydrates. Protein can prolong the time for the stomach to empty and thus can increase satiety. Lean cuts of meat, egg, tofu, fish, and other seafood are rich in high-quality protein and can help retain muscle during weight loss.

A healthy and balanced diet is no doubt the most crucial thing for maintaining a healthy weight in the long term. But do not forget to keep an active lifestyle for a slim and fit figure. The pandemic is not an excuse for not exercising. Aerobics, HIIT, stepping or yoga are exercises that can be done at home without much gear and can be adopted while trying to lose more weight.