

Letter to the Editor

Family Meals away from Home and Nutritional Status of Adolescents

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Sir,

The recent report on "family meals away from home (FMAFH) and nutritional status of adolescents" is very interesting (Cynthia, Zalilah, Lim, 2013). Cynthia *et al.* (2013) noted that "FMAFH can be a source of healthy diet for families provided they have the knowledge, skills and motivation to make healthy food choices". In fact, there are many concerns on this report. Source of FMAFH is an interesting consideration. Fulkerson *et al.* (2011) noted that "although frequent family dinners may be beneficial for adolescents, the source of dinners is likely as important in maintaining healthy weight. If fast food is the source of family meals, it can cause nutritional problem (Boutelle *et al.*, 2007). Provision of knowledge for selection of health foods can be useful. However, the success has to be re-evaluated. In a family with socio-economic problems and lack for time, the family usually selects fast food that is not beneficial for health (Boutelle *et al.*, 2007; Cluskey *et al.*, 2008)

References

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Response to the Letter

While the family meal is shown to have positive impacts on diet, body weight, and cognitive performance (among others) in children and adolescents, food away from home is often associated with intake of energy dense and low nutrient quality foods that could potentially contribute to overweight and obesity. In many developing countries, including Malaysia, combining family meals with meals away from home or relying on 'outside

food' (e.g. food purchased from fast food outlets, restaurants, and food hawkers) for family meals at home is becoming more prevalent, particularly in the urban areas. We do agree with Prof Viroj that the source of food for family meals, whether the meal is home prepared or purchased elsewhere, does matter as it relates to sources of energy and nutrients as well as weight status. However, with a wide variety of food available away from home that can range from hawker to restaurant foods and with varying levels of food costs and healthy / unhealthy food choices, families do have options to select foods that could meet their nutritional needs. Thus, it is important for families to have the relevant knowledge and skills for making healthy food decisions not only for family meals at home but also when eating out. As nutritionists, we still promote 'home-cooked food' for family meals on the premise that the foods are healthier and less expensive than eating out. However, in today's society where family meals away from home or family meals based on purchased food is perhaps inevitable, nutritionists may require innovative strategies to address this emerging nutritional concern.

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