



Vegetables are a must in your daily diet.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS, COURTESY: SHWAPNO

You'll not meet a Bangladeshi ready to pass up free food. In fact, Bangladeshis don't really mind paying for their food, either. As long as we get to eat and feed others, we are a happy bunch. However, our connection to food is limited to just the taste buds. We don't know (or to be succinct, don't want to know) about the things that go in our mouths. It tastes fine? Good enough – in you go! In a world that's seeking good health and fitness almost obsessively, Bangladesh remains strangely unaware, adopting a *laissez faire* attitude to eating and lifestyle.

"Nutrients are the most necessary elements of every food. Unfortunately people in Bangladesh don't have enough knowledge about nutrient intake," says Professor Dr Khurshed Jahan of the Institute of Nutrition and Food Service, University of Dhaka. Nutrient needs differ from people to people, says Dr Jahan. While one person might need more carbohydrates for the nature of their job or lifestyle, someone else might require to have meals that are rich in protein, she says, adding that most people in the country are not even aware of what food type is best suited to their body.

While there are some who will eat anything that is somewhat edible, there are many who believe that starving yourself or following every kind of diet fad will help you stay fit and slim. Falser words were never said. Low-carb diets like the cabbage soup diet or raw food diet focus on a particular food, ruling out entire food groups. "It's imperative for human beings to eat from a variety of food groups, starting from carbohydrates, proteins, fats, micro-nutrients like fruits and vegetables and minerals," says Dr Jahan. "If you want to have a balanced diet, you should make sure that your meals incorporate most of them, if not all."

The myth that fats makes you fat is just that – a myth. A big, fat lie. It depends on the type of fats that you are consuming, believes renowned architect, filmmaker, now a diehard fitness activist Moshuiddin Shaker. Instead of snacking on greasy foods like chips or *chanachur*, which contain fats that increase cholesterol and your weight, we could opt for food items like nuts that contain monounsaturated fats – the 'good fats' that boost your health and well-being.

However, people should be wary of trans and saturated fats that can cause degenerative diseases, says Shaker. "Packaged foods, fried foods, microwave popcorn, candy bars, pastries – these food items are high on trans fat and should duly be avoided," he adds. Why exactly is trans-fat harmful? When a normal fat molecule is twisted during a process called hydrogenation, whereby liquid vegetable oil is heated and combines with hydrogen gas to ensure longevity, trans-fat is formed.

Animal fats, on the other hand, are the basic source of saturated fats. So instead of having butter in your food plan, you could use olive oil. "We often use soybean oil for our cooking purposes," says

Healthy Substitutes to 'Bad' Foods We Love

- Pure (homemade) fruit spread instead of jams
- Jaggery, cinnamon, brown sugar or locally produced honey instead of refined white sugar
- Fruits instead of snack bars
- Dark chocolate instead of milk chocolates
- Sweet potatoes instead of potatoes
- Extra virgin oil or mustard oil instead of vegetable oil
- Homemade sauces instead of bottled sauces
- Wheat flour instead of refined white flour
- Air-popped popcorn instead of chips or microwave popcorn
- Fresh herbs, spices, ginger and garlic instead of salt
- Coconut water instead of aerated or powdered drinks
- Unsweetened yoghurt with fruits instead of ice-cream
- Baked foods instead of fried foods
- Eggs or porridge instead of breakfast cereals

Shaker. "The commercial soybean oil is particularly harmful as in order to increase production, excessive pressure is applied on the soybean in the industrial process, which hampers the original molecular form of the bean." This can lead to terrible health consequences that you won't even be aware of until it's too late, he adds.

Fast food, thus, is a definite no-no. "Most restaurants in Bangladesh tend to reheat the oil that they use several times," says Dr Jahan. Reheating oil repeatedly, she adds, destroys the oil's beneficial antioxidants and forms compounds that can be harmful for the body. "You shouldn't heat oil until it's smoking, that's one of the worst mistakes you can make. Just heat it until you see the oil flickering," says Dr Jahan.

Both Dr Jahan and Moshuiddin Shaker believe that the traditional use of mustard oil can be a better alternative to the more commonly used soybean oil that's used in most urban households now. Mustard oil is produced using a cold process and has 60 percent monounsaturated fatty acids and 21 percent polyunsaturated fatty acids (the good fats) and only about 12 percent saturated fats. These 'good fats' don't get deposited on arterial walls of your heart, thus reducing the chance of heart diseases. "Mustard oil, especially the locally produced ones, is easily available and quite affordable. A small amount is all you need to cook your food and thus, your oil intake is also reduced," adds Shaker.

Another good, albeit a bit expensive alternative, is olive oil. The belief that olive oil is safe for cooking and high temperature frying is

supported by various scientists and research organisations. The scientific journal established in 1953 by the American Chemical Society, the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* tested the effects of continuously heating virgin olive oil for 36 hours at 180 degrees Celsius to measure how the oil degraded. They found that "despite the heating conditions, the olive oil maintained most of its minor compounds and therefore most of its nutritional properties."

Bangladeshis loathe bland food. We love our *moshla* and our salt. Despite being aware of the fact that too much salt is bad for our health, we splurge on this substance and many of us don't hesitate to eat raw salt when we find our food lacking it. "That's a huge mistake," says Dr Jahan. "Most foods such as bread and cereals already contribute a lot of salt to our diet. If you include raw salt as part of your diet, you are basically guaranteeing raised blood pressure and more serious ailments such as heart attack and strokes."

According to the National Health Service (NHS) UK, "adults should eat no more than six grams of salt everyday." This means that you should not have more than one tablespoon of salt in your food. Yes, that is the total amount that you can have in one day.

If you want to cut your salt intake, you should compare the nutrition labels on food packaging when buying everyday items. Check the back of your food packets to check the nutritional value and buy something that is low in salt. "Instead of eating crisps or crackers, go for healthier snack items such as carrots or guavas," says Shaker. You should also go easy on food items such as mayonnaise, mustard, ketchup and soy sauce as they can have a higher amount of

alternatives for sugar include raisins, locally produced honey and fruits.

The typical Bangladeshi breakfast includes *parathas* (flattened bread fried in oil) or *rotis* (flattened bread) made with refined white flour. Even the breads we buy from the bakeries near us are made with refined flour. "Refined flour has a high glycemic index which digests quickly. This can cause harmful diseases such as diabetes, heart diseases and even fatal ailments like cancer," says Shaker. The glycemic index in refined flour releases sugar into the bloodstream swiftly, which causes a sharp insulin response, leading to inflammation in various body parts and insulin resistance which eventually causes type 2 diabetes.

You should also cut down on fried products which make use of refined flour. That means abstaining from beloved snacks like *shingaras*, noodles, cheesy pastas or even fried noodles, as these food items have high levels of carbohydrates, fats and refined flour. All these elements can hamper your metabolism and increase the chances of cancer, Alzheimer's and arthritis.

Whole wheat flour or *atta* is a far better alternative to refined white flour. Opt for brown bread instead of white bread as it is made from whole wheat flour. Similarly, make your cakes and other pastries with whole wheat flour and omit refined white flour from your diet altogether.

We are a meat loving people. Red meat is a particular weakness for most of us. But unless you've been living under a rock for most of your life, you'd know that having large amounts of red meat is

exceptionally bad for you. Carnitine, a compound found in red meat, can clog the arteries of your heart. Moreover, in most cases, the cattle from which you get your meat is reared in terrible conditions and are often artificially fattened with harmful antibiotics and injections. "This is the case with commercial poultry farm raised chickens as well. You can't even imagine how much harm you are causing to your body when you eat red meat and broiler chickens," says Shaker. He suggests that fish, vegetables and locally raised (deshi) chickens be incorporated as a part of one's staple diet. "You can have a certain amount of red meat but eating it everyday is a very bad idea," says Dr Jahan, "especially for your heart."

So if we are to have veggies, fruits and fish, how are we to get rid of the formalin that they are injected with? "You need to keep the fish or vegetables and fruits soaked in water for at least three hours, if not overnight. This ensures that most of the formalin is removed from the skin of your food," says Shaker. Well-known health activist, founder of the health magazine 'Get Fit, Stay Fit' and former air hostess of Biman Airways Jebun Nessa, adds that in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle, you should maintain a healthy house. "If you have a dirty kitchen, your food is bound to get dirty and unhygienic. So take the time out to see how your food is being prepared, and if your house help is actually cleaning every bit of the house.

Your time and patience can save your family from a whole load of health issues."

We are expected to dress our best and eat everything on the table at a typical Bangladeshi wedding. The fact that the food is unabashedly unhealthy, even though it's undeniably scrumptious, doesn't deter us in any way whatsoever. However, when you are expected to attend five functions for ONE wedding in a month where you are expected to attend at least two weddings everyday, you really need to watch what you eat. "At our daughter's wedding, we made arrangements for rice, curry made with locally raised (deshi) chicken and a vegetable dish for aged and health conscious people," says Jebun Nessa. "Bangladeshis have a habit of force feeding their guests. If you absolutely can't ensure that they provide healthy food at their events, then you could eat beforehand from your house and attend the event without any sense of guilt or worry."

Even though we might want to believe that human beings live to eat, it's really the other way around. It's your body and you'll be doing yourself a grave injustice if you continue to abuse it for temporary pleasure. All you need to start on a healthier lifestyle is to sacrifice some things, persevere in your attempts and simply take a look at what you are eating. It's the least you can do for a safe and healthy life.

Sources used: *The Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* and NHS



Take a look at what you are eating for a healthy life.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

salt in them. When cooking, you could always opt for black pepper for seasoning instead of salt. Fresh herbs and spices, which we already use when preparing our local dishes, can also be a better substitute. Lime, garlic and ginger paste and chillies can have the same effect as salt, so instead of adding a higher amount of salt, you could choose to go with some of these alternatives. When making *achaar* and chutneys, use more tomatoes, ginger and garlic instead of a high amount of salt as they will bring similar results in terms of flavour.

White sugar, especially the processed, refined types, is dangerous for your health. Sugar mostly comes from sugar cane or beet plants that are high in minerals, fibre and vitamins. However, when sugar is refined, all the natural components are stripped from them with the exception of sucrose. Sucrose is concentrated and taken out of its natural balance found in plants. Thus, too much refined sugar creates a cycle of intense highs and lows, leading to your blood pressure and sugar and hormones to be completely out of balance.

Jaggery or *gud* as it's known in Bangladesh is a far better alternative to refined sugar, says Moshuiddin Shaker. "Gud is mainly produced by hand and normally does not require any industrial interference. Jaggery is mostly extracted from dates, cane juice or palm saps through a manual process and it doesn't require much refining." Shaker also recommended the use of a brown sugar produced locally in the district of Mymensingh. "It's basically the powdered form of jaggery and is manufactured manually," he says. Other