Fast food ‘can be life-threatening’

Risk of death from heart disease can go up by 80%, says study

By MELISSA PANG

WHILE warnings about eating fast food are common, a study has shown just how life-threatening it can be for Singaporeans.

The study, which specifically tracked Chinese-Singaporeans, found eating Western fast food more than four times a week can increase the risk of dying from heart disease by up to 60 per cent.

It also found that those who go for fast food more than twice a week are 30 per cent more likely to develop type 2 diabetes.

The joint study — by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and the University of Minnesota — is the first of its kind that looks at the impact of fast food on Asians.

Principal investigator, NUS’ Associate Professor Koh Woon Puay, said that while the findings may not be surprising, there is still a lot of interest from the West.

“There is very good evidence to show the effect of a Western diet and its cardiovascular risks on an Asian country that used to eat traditionally,” she said.

About 75,000 were surveyed to look at the association of Western fast food with coronary heart disease mortality in Chinese-Singaporeans, and 45,000 for incidence of type 2 diabetes.

Researchers analysed data from men and women aged 45 to 74 who enrolled in the Singapore Chinese Health Study between 1993 and 1998.

A detailed survey was done on the diet and health of these participants — specifically Hokkiers and Cantonese for genetic homogeneity.

They were asked about their intake of six Western fast foods — hamburgers or cheeseburgers, french fries, pizza, ham and other sandwiches, deep-fried chicken and hot dogs.

Follow-up interviews were conducted between July 1999 and October 2004 to find out if they had been diagnosed with diabetes. Researchers also checked the Registry of Births and Deaths to find out participants’ cause of death, up to the end of 2009.

An analysis of the results revealed that those who ate fast food at least twice a week had a 27 per cent increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes compared to those who did not.

They also had a 56 per cent greater risk of dying of a coronary heart disease.

Of the 811 who ate fast food at least four times a week, 17 died of heart disease.

This group was nearly 80 per cent more at risk of dying of heart disease compared to those who did not eat fast food.

Factors like age, sex, body mass index, smoking status and educational level that could affect a person’s likelihood of getting diabetes or dying of heart disease were adjusted to have minimal effect, said Prof Koh.

At a press briefing yesterday, she also presented the findings of a separate study that found a combination of healthy lifestyle habits can significantly lower a person’s risk of dying of cardiovascular diseases.

The research, involving about 50,000 recruits also from the Singapore Chinese Health Study, gave the thumbs up to a diet rich in vegetables, fruit and soy; exercise; light to moderate alcohol consumption; sleeping six to eight hours; not smoking; and a healthy body mass index.

Both studies were published in the American Heart Association journal, Circulation.

In Singapore, heart diseases account for about a quarter of all deaths while diabetes is the 10th most common cause of death.

The Health Promotion Board recommends eating fast food no more than twice a week.

It is also pushing for good habits from a young age through initiatives to provide healthier meals in childcare centres as well as in primary and secondary schools.