Consumed by emotions

Expert warns comfort eating can become a form of addiction

By AUDREY EDWARDS and LIM WEY WEN

PETALING JAYA: Comfort eating may be a way to “de-stress” for some Malaysians, but an expert has warned that the habit is similar to getting addicted to drugs or computer games.

“You want to make yourself feel good. It’s like doing drugs or playing computer games or even watching three to four movies in a row,” said Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s Health Psychology Programme lecturer Assoc Prof Dr Alvin Ng Lai Oon.

Comfort eating is when one consumes food to relieve stress. It is sometimes referred to as “emotional eating”.

He said there could also be a link between comfort eating and being overweight or obese.

“Comfort food is a part of life and people use it to regulate their emotions.

“If they cannot manage their emotions in other ways, it can lead to overeating or unnecessary eating,” he said.

“The food they eat may not be healthy but it makes them feel better. So, there is a higher risk of being overweight or obese,” said Dr Ng, adding that it was also related to people who were underweight or had a normal body weight.

He said an indication that someone was into comfort eating was when they had the urge to eat or “feel bad” if they did not, or had irrational thoughts – like eating out of fear their mothers would disown them.

Another indication is needing to eat within a short period after having a full meal.

“They claim to feel hungry or have low blood glucose levels when it is not necessarily true, but it gives them a good reason to eat.”

There are currently no local studies to show the number of people who comfort eat.

Dr Ng said most people did not see it as being a problem until they became overweight or obese.

He advised those who sought comfort in food to get counselling to overcome their emotional problems or have a network of friends and family who are “appointed” to tell the person that he or she is comfort eating and to stop doing so.

“It is not advisable to substitute comfort food with normal meals as it leads to sabotaging efforts to maintain or lose weight.

“It would be better to do physical activities than eat,” said Dr Ng.

Meanwhile, Nutrition Society of Malaysia president Dr Tee E Siong said chocolate and ice cream were two of the most common comfort foods.

“I suppose if one finds that a specific food can bring comfort, it is not a real problem,” he said.

“It is important though to explain to the individual the dangers of excessive consumption of certain high-calorie foods.”