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Is there bubble tea even diabetics can love? Low-sugar, low-calorie tweaks are being made

Bubble tea sales in Singapore have already outstripped those of Coke and coffee on one delivery platform. But this drink comes at a price, and the programme Talking Point looks into the quest for healthier versions.



Talking Point host Steven Chia drinks bubble tea for a month to find out what it does to the body.

By Arulnathan John

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SINGAPORE: If Rajen Manicka and his team have their way, Singaporeans may be able to enjoy healthier bubble tea without sacrificing that well-loved taste and chewiness.

Australian-listed company Holista CollTech, where he is the chief executive officer, is partnering SunFresh Fruit Hub from Malaysia to produce bubble tea with the same sweetness but fewer calories and health issues.

Holista claims that its bubble tea is suitable even for diabetics, as one of its healthier ingredients is the tapioca pearls.

Nearly all bubble tea pearls are made of tapioca starch, but Holista mixes the starch with a patented formula made of guar gum, fenugreek (a seasoning used in many Indian curries), lentils and ladies' fingers.



Dr Rajen Manicka showing the ingredients.

The resultant pearls, said Rajen, are still “chewy and nice, but they don’t digest so quickly and so easily” to cause a spike in blood sugar, which is normally stored as fat.

“So you have the pleasure in your mouth, but not the damage in your body,” he added.

Holista’s efforts to convert a concoction with a high glycaemic index (GI) — a measure of how quickly food releases sugar into the blood — to a low-GI version are part of a wider quest for healthier bubble tea.

As the drink rides a wave of renewed popularity, the programme [Talking Point](#) finds out how large a health toll it might carry and whether there are indeed effective alternatives.

‘DELETERIOUS EFFECTS’

Bubble tea arrived in Singapore from Taiwan in the 1990s. And in 2019, milk tea from bubble tea stores became the most popular beverage order on Deliveroo’s platform, overtaking Coca-Cola and coffee.

But a 500 ml serving of milk tea with pearls contains eight teaspoons of sugar, 33 per cent above the World Health Organisation’s recommended daily intake for adults and children for additional health benefits.

The tapioca pearl toppings alone make up close to half of the calorie content: 156 out of the 335 calories.

“Over time, a high intake of sugar and refined carbohydrates in the form of the toppings can lead to deleterious effects in the blood,” noted family physician Vincent Chia.

“Sugar intake has been associated with increased inflammation in the blood stream, which is again a bad thing.”



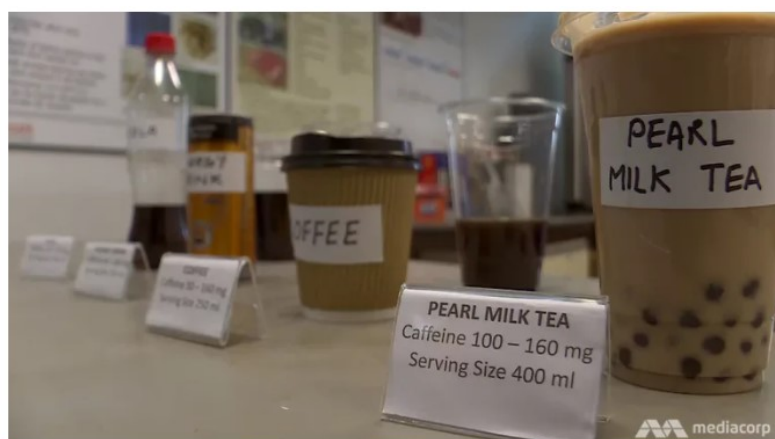
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He added that sugar spikes and the fluctuations in blood sugar from frequent consumption of bubble tea can lead to mood changes and fatigue.

There is also caffeine — 100 to 160 mg in a 400 ml cup of pearl milk tea, similar to a standard cup of coffee and more than in a serving of carbonated drink, said Wong Weng Wai, a lecturer in applied food science at Temasek Polytechnic.

“When the caffeine effects wear off, you’ll feel tired, and (you) will start to ... crave for more caffeine so that you stay alert,” he added.

“If you have too much (caffeine), then that would cause other effects, like hypertension, headache, dehydration and sometimes ... an elevated heartbeat as well as high blood pressure. But these effects vary with the individual.”



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Coffee has 30 to 160 mg of caffeine per standard serving of 250 ml — comparable to bubble tea.

Paediatrician Lim Yang Chern from Thomson Paediatric Centre advised children under 12 years old against taking caffeinated drinks, which may cause them insomnia and anxiety.

In a similar vein, the father of three advised older children and adults not to drink bubble tea after 4pm.

To students who want “that buzz” when they study for their examinations, he stressed: “If you’re not sleeping well, how are you preparing yourself for the exam?”

One person who got more than he had bargained for was Talking Point host Steven Chia, after he drank bubble tea thrice weekly for a month as an “experiment”.



Steven Chia's sugar, cholesterol and blood inflammation levels and liver function were tracked over the month.

Before he started, he was at low risk of developing cardiovascular diseases. But after a month, his cholesterol levels and inflammation markers (measured with a blood test) increased, putting him at moderate risk of a heart attack or stroke.

He was also 1.9 kg heavier, even though he had continued to exercise regularly.

The doctor who tracked his health markers told him: “If the only general change you had was to add the bubble tea ... (it) would logically result in such changes in indicators.”

NEW TASTES, BUT IS CHANGE ON ITS WAY?

While much has been said about the sugar levels in bubble tea, there have been some changes of late. About two years ago, retailers introduced more varieties and flavours beyond the original pearl milk tea.

And shops are now selling low-sugar or low-calorie versions by, for example, allowing customers to add more nutritious toppings instead of tapioca pearls.

These alternatives include aloe vera gel, grass jelly, ai yu jelly (a low-carbohydrate, low-calorie substitute made from the seeds of a fig species) and red beans.

Mount Alvernia Hospital's head of nutrition and dietetics, Sarah Sinaram, recommends such toppings, or none at all, as well as low-caffeine teas when ordering bubble tea.

"White pearls would definitely be a lower-sugar option ... I like to have things that are paired with vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre — so when you have your bubble tea, at least you have some nutrients," she said.

"A lower-caffeine option would be things like our green tea, our oolong tea, and now we even have alisan, which is a type of oolong, and earl grey tea options."



There are more options these days.

Otherwise she recommends low-fat or skim milk.

What many bubble tea fans love, however, is the chewy texture of tapioca pearls, which the aforementioned variants lack.

This is why Holista thinks it has the healthier answer, with the pearls but "about 60 per cent less sugar" in its bubble tea than conventional bubble teas.

“We’ve done the taste test several times,” said Rajen. “We work with a company that has the exclusive franchise for the Taiwanese bubble tea, so they know that game very well, and they’ve been very happy with what they’ve seen.

“And we want to work with them to bring (the sugar) down even further, without sacrificing ... the aroma, the look and the feel.”

This new bubble tea may be in Singapore within six to nine months, he envisaged. But one drawback may be its price: A cup may cost “between 15 and 20 per cent more” than current prices.



Holista CollTech is a food ingredients specialist listed in Australia.

An alternative to bubble tea itself — but still sweet — is yoghurt drink, as marketed by Yomie’s Rice x Yogurt, for example.

Besides milk tea being replaced by yoghurt, the pearls are replaced by toppings such as fresh fruits and “some superfoods like dates and purple rice”, cited marketing manager Heme Ching.

“We use purple rice to create that kind of chewiness,” she said. “Once the raw purple rice is cooked, it’ll give you a ... glutinous rice kind of texture — a bit sticky.

“There’s a lot of antioxidants ... It’s kind of like a more wholegrain food.”

Change, however, may take time.

Yomie's Rice x Yogurt was launched in Singapore at the end of 2019. And it is up against “not just a drink” but a “lifestyle”, social media influencer Daniel Ang of Daniel’s Food Diary said in describing bubble tea.

“It’s a drink that makes you feel hip,” he added, citing collaborations between bubble tea brands and fashion, ice-cream or other lifestyle brands.

So the addiction to the drink is not just about the sugar or the stuff inside — and the quest for healthier bubble tea continues.

Watch these two Talking Point episodes [here](#) and [here](#). The programme airs on Channel 5 every Thursday at 9.30pm.



Yoghurt drinks as colourful and photogenic as bubble tea.

Source: CNA/dp