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Some hospitals offer plant-based menu options

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Some hospitals in Singapore have started offering plant-based options on inpatient menus as part of their sustainability efforts, after evaluating them to be healthy and nutritionally balanced.

Alexandra Hospital (AH) and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital (NTFGH) have removed beef and mutton – considered the most carbon-intensive meat products globally – from their inpatient menus since August 2023, and replaced them with plant-based options made from soya protein.

KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) started offering plant-based options to patients in January 2023, while the National University Hospital (NUH) has been doing so since 2018.

According to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation, the livestock sector accounts for about 12 per cent of human-caused global greenhouse gas emissions.

Said an NUH spokesperson: "A well-planned plant-based diet can offer numerous health benefits, and the incorporation of more plant-based foods into our diets can play a significant role in promoting environmental sustainability in the long run."

These hospitals say their plant-based options are offered to patients at no additional cost, and that the meals have been evaluated by their dietitians to be healthy and nutritionally balanced.

Mr Kenneth Francisco, AH's chef-cum-assistant director of group hospitality, said that during



Mr Kenneth Francisco, Alexandra Hospital's chef-cum-assistant director of group hospitality, and dietitian Aswami Swamedharan with plant-based meat dishes. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



From left: Kidney bean porridge, fried curry noodle and mee goreng mamak are a few plant-based dishes that will be introduced to the inpatient menu at the National University Hospital in August 2024. PHOTOS: NUH

the process of creating a plant-based masala dish, he reduced the amount of salt by 20 per cent compared with the usual chicken or fish masala dish served to patients, after receiving feedback from the

hospital's in-house nutritionist.

This is due to the higher sodium levels found in most plant-based meat products.

The NUH spokesperson added: "The evaluation of plant-based dis-

hes in NUH often revolves around promoting health and meeting patients' dietary needs. Chefs and dietitians collaborate closely to develop recipes for plant-based dishes, ensuring they meet patients' nutritional requirements while aligning with dietary guidelines and restrictions."

At the four hospitals, only patients with no dietary restrictions can choose plant-based options from the inpatient menu. Patients who require more specialised diets, such as low-salt or low-potassium diets, are served meals tailored to their medical conditions.

Currently, AH and NTFGH offer plant-based options for lunch and dinner two to three times a week. At KKH, plant-based options are offered twice a week – once for lunch and dinner – while NUH offers plant-based options for every meal.

But these hospitals said the number of patients who opt for the plant-based options is low.

AH and NTFGH estimate that only about 5 per cent of their patients opt for plant-based options, while at KKH, it is about 5 per cent to 10 per cent.

For NUH, the take-up rate is about 15 per cent, said its spokesperson.

Younger patients are more open to trying plant-based options, while seniors are not as keen, noted Mr Francisco. He and his team at AH will continue to work on the taste and reduce salt content based on patient feedback.

Ms Mirre Gosker, managing director of Singapore-based alternative protein think-tank Good Food Institute Asia-Pacific, said plant-based meats offer a number of proven health benefits that make them sensible options for all consumers, especially for those on the mend.

"Compared with conventional meat, plant proteins generally have fewer calories, less saturated fat and zero cholesterol," she said.

Commending the hospitals for introducing plant-based options in their menus for patients, Ms Gosker added: "By ramping up distribution of plant-based meat through hospitals, governments can empower local manufacturers to scale up their operations, drive down costs through economies of scale, and make healthier, more sustainable foods more affordable for all consumers."

Globally, the healthcare industry contributes over 4 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, and the industry is stepping up efforts to cut emissions from the sector. In Singapore, a Centre for Sustainable Medicine was established at the National University of Singapore in 2023 to look at ways to reduce emissions from the sector.

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