

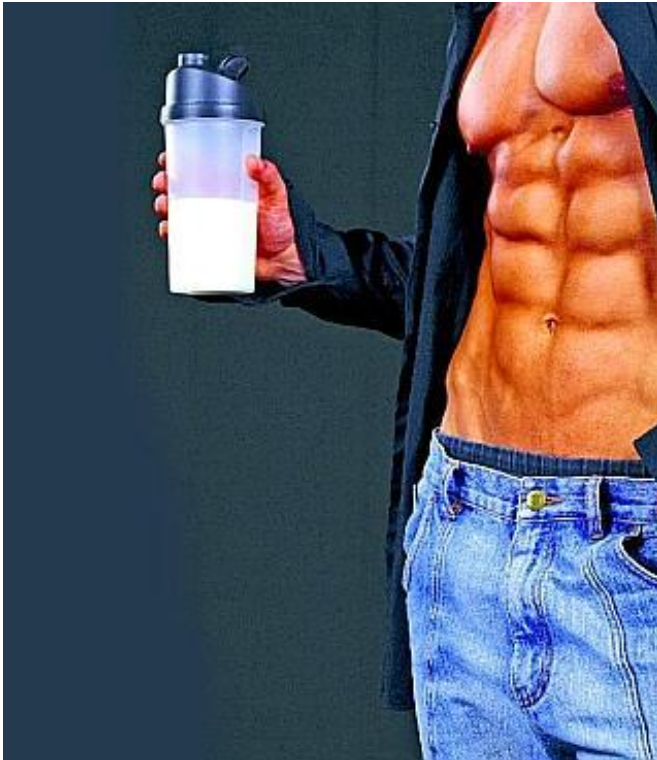
Mind Your Body

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FEATURE

Protein shake craze

A fitness frenzy among Singaporeans has sparked a growing demand for protein shakes. **BENITA AW YEONG** reports



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Working out is ranking high on the priority list of Singaporeans these days.

The fitness frenzy has spurred the growing popularity of protein shakes - made by mixing protein powder in water or milk - which are touted as being able to repair muscles damaged during intense workouts.

In a report in The Straits Times last year, seven local fitness chains reported that their membership figures soared by 10 to 100 per cent over six months.

And at least one supplier of protein powder, NutriFirst, a Singaporean supplier of nutrition products, has seen better sales of the product.

Its founder and managing director, Mr Barnabas Huang, noted that its sales of protein powder has increased by 15 to 20 per cent per year over the past seven years.

The company now sells between 10,000kg to 20,000kg of protein powder in a year.

Health stores including GNC and Holland & Berrett sell protein powders - which do not come cheap.

A 909g tub costs \$103 at GNC and prices can go up to about \$200 depending on brand and quantity.

Protein powders can also be bought online and they come in flavours like Swiss chocolate, banana cream and fruit punch.

For muscle growth and repair

Bodybuilder and real estate agent Sharmila Tanapathy, 36, who was ranked eighth at this year's World Bodybuilding and Physique Sports Championships (Women's Model Physique category), is no stranger to protein shakes.

Miss Tanapathy, who has been in the bodybuilding scene for 12 years, spends an average of \$300 a month on protein powder.

She works out at the gym six times a week and follows a diet of chicken breast, brown rice, broccoli and fruit.

'Weight-lifting sometimes causes muscle tears,' she said. 'Protein is needed for muscles to grow and repair. It is vital to my exercise and training regimen. I have tubs and tubs of it at home,' she added.

Other sportsmen, such as national sailor Sherman Cheng, see protein shakes as a way to bulk up or gain muscle mass.

'I needed to put on weight for my sport, so that was one of the supplements I took two to three years ago,' said the 18-year-old, who emerged champion in last year's International 420 World Championships with his teammate Justin Liu.

He has since switched to weight gainers, which contain proteins, carbohydrates and fat to help pack on the pounds more easily than the shakes that contain only protein.

Undergraduate Matthias Lim, 22, also began drinking protein shakes at the age of 15 to gain muscle mass.

He said: 'I'm a rugby player and getting bigger and stronger is important in my sport. The most common method of doing this was taking protein shakes.'

So how effective are protein drinks and who should have them?

Ms Joanna Tan, a dietitian at Changi General Hospital, said that while research is unclear on whether protein shakes can enhance sports performance and muscle strength, they definitely help in repairing muscle wear and tear.

'For endurance athletes such as triathletes and marathon runners, protein shakes help the body to recover from intense exercise by restoring muscle glycogen, which acts as a source of fuel for exercise,' said Ms Tan. 'Strength athletes such as bodybuilders may also benefit from muscle repair,' she added.

Muscle glycogen functions as an immediate reserve source of glucose available for muscle cells.

Convenient option

The quick and easy preparation of protein shakes is part of their appeal.

Ms Tan said that protein shakes serve as a convenient and compact option for boosting energy, carbohydrate and protein intake when everyday foods are not available or impractical to consume.

This is the case for Mr Lim, who said: 'My workouts at the gym are pretty intense. To receive sufficient protein from natural sources alone, I would have to be eating ridiculous amounts of meat each day. So protein shakes were the obvious choice.'

Dietitians are quick to add, however, that protein shakes are usually not their first recommendation.

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants, said: 'Natural foods are usually my primary recommendation for protein intake. You can get the same amount of protein that a

shake provides from half a chicken breast, three glasses of milk, four egg whites and three slices of cheese.

'These natural food sources are also packed with vitamins like vitamins A and B as well as minerals like zinc and calcium, and hence are more beneficial.'

Side effects

Dietitians warn that protein shakes should not be confused with meal replacements or used as weight-loss diets.

'A weight-loss meal needs to comprise carbohydrates, protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals. Protein shakes do not contain these,' said Ms Reutens.

Protein shakes are also not risk-free.

'Side effects frequently occur in those who are lactose or soya intolerant. Symptoms include diarrhoea, nausea, indigestion and constipation,' said Ms Pauline Sim, sports nutritionist at the Singapore Sports Council's Singapore Sports Institute.

Those with kidney problems should also avoid them.

Ms Reutens said: 'Long-term use of protein shakes may result in compromised kidney function due to the increased workload the kidneys have to undertake.'

Dietitian Derrick Ong, who runs his own consultancy Eat Right, cautioned that taking in more than 2g of protein per kilogram of bodyweight a day may lead to the excess being oxidised and stored as fat.

'In the long run, too much protein powder can also turn the blood acidic and, in order to neutralise this, the body will leech calcium from your bones,' he said, warning that this may weaken the bone structure.

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Bodybuilder Sharmila Tanapathy (Photo 2), 36, who spends an average of \$300 a month on protein powder