

MIND YOUR BODY

Cover Story



JOAN CHEW

Some hospitals here are making sure their inpatients feel the Christmas spirit

Spreading Yuletide joy to the sick

Medical staff and volunteers are pulling out all the stops to make sure patients in hospitals and hospices are given a dose of Christmas cheer. Clinical wards are now awash in

festive colours, carols fill the corridors and even menus are specially crafted to include holiday staples, such as turkey and pudding. Mind Your Body checks out the celebrations.

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A taste of Christmas minus the guilt

Spending Christmas in hospital is no joyous affair, but many patients can, at least, look forward to having festive fare served to their bedsides.

That is what eight hospitals, both public and private, are planning to do, based on checks by Mind Your Body.

Patients will get to enjoy traditional favourites, such as turkey, creamy soups and hearty potato dishes, as well as desserts such as pudding. These are available either on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, as an alternative or add-on to the usual Western menu selection.

In addition, they need not worry about the meals being overly indulgent – the dishes are all made healthier with the approval of dietitians.

For instance, at the four private hospitals under the Parkway Pantai group, soups will be prepared with low-salt broth, said the group's chief dietitian Lock Poh Leng.

This includes cream of chestnut and pumpkin with honey and roasted butternut soup. "The amounts of butter and whipped cream used for the creamy soups have been reduced by at least half from the original recipes. Instead, low-fat milk, herbs and spices are used," she said.

The chefs will also skim off the layer of oil on top of the soup before serving it to patients, she added.

Each of the four hospitals – Mount Elizabeth Orchard, Mount Elizabeth Novena, Gleneagles and Parkway East – has its own Christmas menu, with different types of soups, desserts and side dishes, along with the main course of roast turkey.

In previous years, about 40 per cent of their patients opted for these special meals, said Mr Tan Chow Jin, senior manager at the food, nutrition and beverage department of the four hospitals.

At National University Hospital (NUH), healthier cooking methods are used to prepare its holiday offerings, which include roast turkey stuffed with mushrooms and chestnuts, roast herb potatoes and balsamic glazed carrots with grilled shallots.

The dishes are mostly roasted, baked or grilled – methods which require little oil, yet retain most of the nutrients in the food, said Ms Lam Mei Peng, a dietitian at NUH's food service partner Sodexo.

Low-fat milk, instead of the full-cream



ST PHOTOS: DESMOND FOO, LAU FOOK KONG
Chefs Norman Leow (above right) and Burhanudin Mani (above left) from National University Hospital, and Parkway Pantai group's chief dietitian Lock Poh Leng (right) and executive chef of Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital Wong Boo Hor (far right), with the dishes they will be serving on Christmas Eve.



version, is used in the cinnamon honey pumpkin soup. Also, butter has been replaced with margarine, which has no cholesterol and is lower in harmful saturated fat.

Ms Lam said the entire meal packs about 12g of fibre, or about 48 per cent of a person's recommended daily intake.

Dietary fibre not only helps to prevent constipation, but also lowers bad cholesterol levels in the blood, controls blood sugar levels, aids in weight loss and promotes a healthy gut, she said.

Meanwhile, patients at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and Singapore General Hospital (SGH) get two festive menus to choose from.

At KKH, one of the menus is for those who may need to lose weight or control their diabetes. Its senior dietitian Grace Quek said this menu is even lower in fat, sodium and carbohydrates than the standard festive meal

the hospital is serving, which includes minestrone soup, roast turkey with cranberry sauce and a fruit salad.

SGH, on the other hand, has prepared a Western halal "soft" diet for people with difficulty chewing and poor dentition, featuring a turkey stroganoff dish. The other menu has turkey roulade with a mushroom and walnut stuffing. For a healthier fix, the turkey skin for both dishes will be removed.

At Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), patients will be treated to muffins which are low in calories and sugar.

TTSH dietitian Alvernia Chua said each muffin weighs only 60g, compared with a regular muffin serving of 100g to 120g.

KKH's Ms Quek said these special treats are meant to "bring joy to our inpatients, who cannot be home to celebrate with their families".

"It is an effort to make them feel at home," she added.



PHOTOS: PAUSE FOR A CAUSE, LIM SIN THAI, LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Nur As'Syurah Abdul Rashid, with her mother, Madam Nurul Qamar Mohd Thoah and members of cosplay volunteer group Pause for a Cause, at KK Women's and Children's Hospital; Airis Putri Eryna with the cookies she baked at National University Hospital Medical Centre; and Madam Maggie Yeo plays with dog trainer Bernard Yeo's miniature schnauzer during a pet-therapy session at Dover Park Hospice.

Deck the wards with boughs of holly

Christmas light-ups and decorations are not confined to shopping malls, hotels and offices.

Hospitals, too, have decked their premises in festive style.

Take a stroll through Mount Alvernia Hospital this month and you will find Christmas trees at almost every turn, many of which are made with recycled materials.

During a one-hour tour last Wednesday, Mind Your Body spotted trees made with items which can be easily found in homes. They include plastic cups, which are illuminated with blue LED lights, shuttlecocks arranged in a flower pattern and attached to toilet rolls, and egg cartons which are painted green and stacked on top of one another.

At the paediatric ward, the children were so intrigued by the Christmas tree and snowman decor – made from colourful balloons – that a balloon pump is kept at the nurses' station to inflate balloons on request.

Business analyst Joel Teo, 38, said such decorations gave the illusion that he was not staying in a hospital.

He wanted so much to feel at home that he chose to wear his own clothes while being hospitalised at Mount Alvernia Hospital for a muscle injury in his right shoulder.

At Tan Tock Seng Hospital's coronary care unit, senior staff nurse Jasmine Huang said the team had been collecting used medicine bottles since the start of the year, with the aim of using them to build a Christmas tree. More than 100 of these bottles were used to build their 1m-tall tree.

Her team also used expired blood-collection tubes and plastic medicine cups to decorate the ceilings in the ward.

Besides these visual treats, patients also get to take part in Christmas-related activities held within the various health institutions.

One such patient is four-year-old Airis Putri Eryna, who attended a cookie-making workshop at National University Hospital (NUH) Medical Centre last Friday.

It was a treat for Airis. Her doctor had postponed her chemotherapy session that day as she had contracted the flu and a cough.

However, the girl refused to leave without making her own cookies, said her mother, Madam Putri Nazirah, a 21-year-old clinic assistant.

As she had to be kept away from other children taking part in the workshop, a special one-on-one session was arranged for her.

The shy girl, who has acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, got to mould dough into different shapes, such as Mickey Mouse, during the one-hour session, which was supervised by Ms Esther Chua, programme coordinator at the Children's Cancer Foundation.

When asked if she would share her cookies with her two younger brothers, Airis shook her head gently.

Ms Chua said other activities lined up for young patients at NUH include carolling tomorrow and a Christmas party on Dec 23.

At KK Women's and Children's Hospital, young patients got to hang out with anime characters earlier this month, when four members from cosplay volunteer group Pause for a Cause popped by their wards.

One of the patients, 12-year-old Nur As'Syurah Abdul Rashid, said Little Red Riding Hood was her favourite as she used to dress up as the character herself. "I was surprised to see them in the hospital. I didn't think they would come here."

Even animals got in on the celebrations. On Monday, patients at HCA Hospice Care and Dover Park Hospice had a pleasant surprise during their regular pet-therapy sessions, when eight dogs and a rabbit came dressed up for Christmas. Some wore Santa costumes, while others had reindeer antlers on their heads.

The sight of the furry visitors lifted patients' spirits. One such person was Madam Maggie Yeo, 57, who enjoyed herself so much that she asked the dog trainer if she could keep his miniature schnauzer, amid laughter from the hospice staff.

The housewife, who has kidney cancer, has been at the hospice since last month.

Tomorrow, the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) will be holding its annual Christmas carnival for 120 of its long-stay patients, as well as 30 other patients from Hougang Care Centre and Tai Pei Social Service.

They will get to play old-school games, such as kuti-kuti (animal-shaped plastic tokens) and five stones, which also serve to improve their hand-eye coordination, said IMH senior occupational therapist Jayson Davamoni Thomas. Such games are also used as a form of reminiscence therapy to help patients recall past experiences and strengthen their memories.

Student volunteer Serena Lin, 19, helped to pack goodie bags, decorate the carnival stalls and will man two booths with 13 schoolmates from ITE College East.

The thought of interacting with people with mental conditions does not faze Ms Lin, who had volunteered at IMH once before.

"At first, I thought it would be scary to work with people who cannot handle their emotions. Later, I found them to be quite friendly."

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