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Too hot to handle

STORIES BY CHRISTINA CHIN



Dr Tan: "You are what you eat".

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If you find yourself getting angry and is one breath short from a violent rage, look at the thermostat and check what you had for lunch. The wave of aggression could be related to your food and the weather.

FITNESS instructor Mary Oh, 26, sees red when it's hot.

"When my car air-conditioner is not working, I find myself getting angrier and more aggressive on the road, more so if it's a particularly hot day," says Oh, who admits to having a bad temper.

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Research shows a clear correlation between violence and the temperature with people getting more aggressive as the temperature gets hotter, psychologist and criminologist Dr Geshina Ayu Mat Saat says.

In the United States, a new study by researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, and Princeton University indicates that as the world gets warmer, people's tempers tend to get hotter.

Data from the study, which reportedly covered all major regions of the world, show similar patterns of conflict linked to climatic changes, such as increased drought or higher than average annual temperature. Aggressive acts like committing violent crimes and waging war become more likely with each added degree, the researchers found.



Dr Gurdial: "People can become irritable due to high urid acid level".

But, says Dr Geshina from Universiti Sains Malaysia's Forensic Science Programme, this is also dependent on what "the normal functioning level" for individuals and localised societies is.

"For example, if a normal person is used to a temperature of 30°C, an increase to 32°C won't cause drastic changes that can result in violent behaviour. But if this person is used to 20°C and is exposed to 30°C, then the change in aggression levels is likely as he either becomes lethargic or more agitated," she says.

Citing another example, she says if a person already has symptoms of an anti-social or aggressive personality, an increase of a mere 2°C could be enough to set him off.

Although variations in climatic temperature and humidity play important roles, there is no definite or one trigger for the escalation of violence.

She adds that in psychophysiology, a person's biological functions are affected by external climatic variations.

Being stressed, uncomfortably warm, sweating excessively (due to the heat) and not getting what he or she wants immediately result in higher impatience.

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These may very well trigger physical violence and rash actions, she says.

Weather madness

According to the US study, violent conflicts might occur for a variety of reasons but may be more likely when climatic conditions deteriorate. Perpetrators of personal violence and crimes such as murder, assault, rape and domestic violence, inter-group violence and political instability and institutional breakdowns exhibit systematic and large responses to changes in climate.



Dr Geshina: "Eat different foods in moderate portions".

Closer to home, Dr Geshina is compiling information on recent weather patterns and crime trends, especially incidents of personal violence such as sexual assault cases.

She has recorded that between May and July, coincidentally the humid "haze season", close to 10 crimes of passion were reported nationwide.

> On July 26, a man set fire to his wife's family home in Taman Kota Jaya in Kota Tinggi after failing to find his wife there.

> On July 22, a 50-year-old man set himself ablaze in front of his wife in their apartment after he suspected her of having an affair with her boss.

> On July 6, a "tomboy" scorned allegedly torched a house in Felda Keratong, Rompin, after failing to get the family's approval for her relationship with a woman.

> On June 24, a 36-year-old woman was set on fire at her house in Bukit Tengah, Bukit Mertajam.

> On June 22, a 22-year-old woman was torched at a flat she shared with her boyfriend in Cheras after what appeared to be a lovers' quarrel.

> On May 4, a woman was allegedly stabbed to death by her fiance who later attempted suicide by consuming poison.

> On May 3, a 60-year-old cook repeatedly stabbed his 23-year-old engineer girlfriend when she wanted to end their six-year relationship.



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From May until recently, parts of the country experienced heat waves, with temperatures rising up to 37°C in the Klang Valley. According to the Malaysian Meteorological Department, the haze had made the days hotter.

If you find yourself getting agitated, aggressive and irritable or if you are feeling violent, Dr Geshina says, just chill!

“Get away from crowded places and find ways to calm down and cool off.

“Spikes in stress would worsen the situation and trigger violence. Deep breathing exercises help to improve oxygen and blood flow in the body which also calms a person down.

“Drinking plain water, either warm or cold, also reduces the body’s temperature and its reaction to external temperature,” she advises.

She points out that though the selection of colours and material may seem trivial, they impact a person’s response to temperature changes.

Avoid red and orange tones as this makes a person more prone to aggression.

She says clothes should not be too tight as it makes a person more likely to sweat excessively and become irritable as a result. “Cotton and silk are good choices as they are cooler than synthetic materials.

Hot plate

Dr Gurdial Singh Sandhu, who runs the Hahnemann Homoeopathy and Alternative Medicine Centre in Penang, claims that higher atmospheric temperature causes the body temperature to rise, resulting in over-activity of the endocrine system, organs and brain waves.

He adds that inhalation of heavy metals such as lead, mercury, cadmium and arsenic from the atmosphere can also cause irritability and aggressiveness.

Dr Ellycia Tan Pin Ting explains that the basic principles of traditional Chinese medicinal philosophy are based on the *yin* and *yang* philosophy where everything has an opposite reaction, yet both are interdependent.

“The Chinese use water and fire to symbolise the two – anything moving, hot, bright or hyperactive is *yang* while anything quiescent, cold, dim or hypoactive is *yin*.

“There are six ‘excesses’ (wind, cold, fire, dampness, dryness and heat) used to describe disharmony patterns that display certain symptoms in the human body.

“These symptoms resemble the effects of climatic factors. (For instance) the characteristics of fire or heat excess (in a person) are high fever, rapid pulse, bad temper and agitation,” says Dr Tan, who is a medical columnist for a Chinese vernacular daily.

An expert in acupuncture and internal medicine with degrees in Chinese and Western medicine, physiotherapy and rehabilitation, she says hot and spicy food

like chilli peppers, onions, beef jerky, onion, garlic and ginger are *yang* and can make a person aggressive, hyperactive, hot-tempered and agitated.

“You are what you eat,” she says, adding that deficiencies in nutrients, magnesium, Vitamin C and B could cause someone to have a shorter fuse.

Dr Gurdial says food and beverages may cause irritability and aggressiveness of the psychosomatic kind because of its chemical structure which can negatively impact the body, mind and soul.

Junk food, fast food and spicy food are the main culprits.

Spicy *nasi kandar*, *sambal* and curries are rich in hot spices and extremely high in both sodium chloride and mono-sodium glutamate (MSG).

Dr Gurdial, whose credentials include diplomas in homoeopathy and iridology from the United Kingdom and a doctorate in alternative medicine from India, claims that these hot capsicum and chilli blends also contain poppy seeds which can bring about hallucinations.

“A 70-year-old patient of mine used to consume *nasi kandar* almost daily. He was very irritable and angry, all because of the hot and spicy food,” he says.

Another patient was an 11-year-old student whose parents were puzzled by his hot temper and angry behaviour. He later discovered that the child was consuming too much salty food.

“People can become irritable due to high uric acid levels and hypertension because of their salty, spicy diet but they always fail to realise that the culprit is food,” he shares.

Other “trigger foods” that could make one extra irritable include tomatoes and durian which, according to Dr Gurdial, result in high uric acid build-up in the body.

“When blood sugar levels are high, the body becomes heaty as the liver and pancreas cannot keep up with the oxidation of the excess sugar. This makes the individual irritable and aggressive.

“Similarly, high alcohol levels in the blood circulatory systems can cause havoc to the internal body chemistry. One of the attributes of too much alcohol is outspokenness and aggressiveness that can lead to violence. Inability to think can lead to anger and that can end in physical brawls,” he points out.

Meanwhile, low blood sugar levels can cause psychosomatic behaviour like depression, suicidal tendencies, outbursts and emotional instability, he notes.

He cites green leafy vegetables, fruits, peanuts, pumpkin seeds, almonds, gelatin, peaches, red peppers, papaya, corn, kidney beans, peas, sunflower seeds, lentils, turnips, carrots, squash, broccoli, avocados, bananas and watermelons as “foods which help keep us calm”.

Whole grains like wheat which contain a lot of gluten, caffeine, alcohol, milk and tobacco can cause high acidity levels in the body and blood pressure to rise.

“High acidity is among the main causes of irritability, aggressiveness and anger,” he says.

Dr Geshina recommends eating different foods in moderate portions.

Over-aggressive behaviour can be provoked by a reaction to the ingredients in common foods and food additives, she says.

“These range from irritability to a psychotic aggressive reaction caused by foods with high sugar or salt content and those that lack nutrients.

“People indulging in too much meat, processed or canned food and junk food diets have also been found to be impulsive, highly irritable, aggressive and sensitive to criticism,” she says.

This means no *nasi lemak* or *roti canai* every morning, limiting carbonated drinks to a maximum of two cans a week and limiting intake of fast food like fried chicken, burgers and pizza to a maximum of two to three times a week.

“Not drinking (enough) water to flush out the toxins (is a problem).

“But don’t drink bored water (drilled from wells) as it may lead to heavy metal poisoning and trigger dormant aggressive or anti-social or hyperactivity tendencies,” she advises.

If you find yourself feeling violent, consider Chinese food therapy, Dr Tan recommends.

She says American ginseng, for example, has *yin* properties which work to rid the body of excessive *yang*.

Nux Vomica, Chamomila and Lycopodium are among the other plants used in herbal medicine to balance and calm the body and mind.

“These can actually reduce feelings of irritability, aggression or frustration but you can also consider alternative therapies like cupping, acupuncture, qi gong or gua sha,” she says.

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