

Give Malaysian Consumers Freedom To Choose Low-GI Food: Holista

By MP Durgahyeni | 19 May 2021

Low-glycaemic index (GI) content claims in food are practiced all over the world, but Malaysia is still far behind, says Holista Biotech, a natural products biotech company.



Rajen M, CEO of Holista Biotech. Picture courtesy of Holista Biotech.

KUALA LUMPUR, May 19 – Recognising low-glycaemic index (GI) food in Malaysia will empower consumers to make healthy choices, Holista Biotech said, amid the rise of chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity.

GI content claims in food are practised in Australia and New Zealand, but Malaysia has yet to permit low-GI food labelling or draft regulations on the classification of low-GI food.

“The government is already regulating sugar and allows labelling of organic food, so why not low-GI food?” said Rajen M, CEO of Holista Biotech, a natural products biotechnology company.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) did not approve Holista’s application to include a low-GI content claim label for its innovative low-GI roti canai.

Rajen pointed out that the product was researched and developed with testing conducted in University of Sydney, and with partnership with Jennie Brand Miller and Dr David Jenkins, both pioneers in GI research.

“Over the years, we have received various assistance from the government to develop the low GI know-how, and we are grateful for that. But we are disappointed with the MOH’s decision to reject our appeal on recognising our product,” he told *CodeBlue* in an interview.

MOH defines GI as a measurement on how fast or slow a food with carbohydrate can increase one’s blood sugar level. Low-GI foods are absorbed slowly, whereas high-GI foods are absorbed fast.

Australia’s Glycemic Index Foundation (GIF) classifies food on a range until 100 to distinguish the speed at which a particular food increases one’s blood sugar level. Foods that record under 55 are low GI, as they release sugar into the bloodstream slowly. GI ratings at 56 to 69 are classified as medium, while foods with GI ratings at 70 or above are classified as high-GI food.

Non-Recognition Hurts Market Expansion

“Allowing the use of GI food labels has the potential to confuse consumers because it is quite difficult to understand in general and the stated GI value alone cannot give a comprehensive picture of a food,” the Working Committee of Nutritionists, Health Declarations and Advertising – under the purview of MOH – told Holista in an email last March 9, as sighted by *CodeBlue*, in reference to Holista’s application for low-GI labels on its low-GI roti canai.

Rajen said that the product's patent has been approved in the US, Europe, Singapore, Australia, Philippines, Japan, and Malaysia. Holista markets its low-GI products in various nations that allow low-GI labeling, including in the US, China, Australia, India and many more.

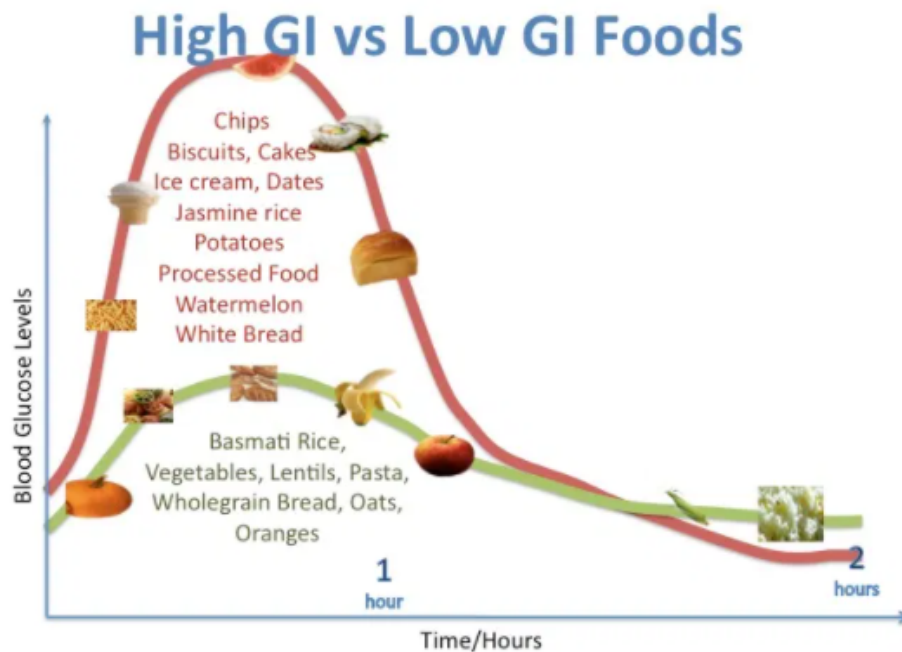
"The decision by the Ministry of Health's decision to reject our application to launch the world's first low GI roti canai has seriously curbed the market expansion of the product range," he said.

"When we try to market these products in other countries, they ask if it is recognised in our own country. This creates a reluctance and limits our expansion."

Apart from that, Rajen pointed out that the four ingredients that are part of the product, if approved, may be homegrown and create business opportunities.

"These ingredients can be grown in Malaysia and could provide an increase in revenue for farmers as well as the government."

Medical Experts Want Low-GI Recognition



Graph adapted from: www.gisymbol.com (University of Sydney). Images from Microsoft Clipart.

Medical experts have also called for the regulation and recognition of low-GI food in Malaysia, like in Australia and New Zealand, to help prevent diabetes.

Dr Chooi Kheng Chiew, a consultant endocrinologist and physician at KPJ Ampang Puteri Specialist Hospital, said an effort to regulate and recognise food classified as low-GI is necessary in Malaysia.

“To avoid unscrupulous people from misleading the public regarding their products,” he told CodeBlue.

This sentiment was also echoed by Viola Michael, a senior dietitian in the allied health science division, MOH, who was formerly attached to the non-communicable diseases (NCD) section under the disease control division of MOH.

“It’s high time that we need analysis and labelling for GI as our population is already at risk, with one in two obese and overweight, and one in five diabetic,” Viola explained.

Dr Chooi added that low-GI food could control one’s blood glucose and help reduce the rate of diabetes, a chronic disease that is estimated to affect 18.3 per cent of the adult population in Malaysia, according to the [National Health and Morbidity Survey \(NHMS\) 2019](#).

Low-GI Regulations In Australia, New Zealand

GI content claims in food are practiced nationwide in Australia and New Zealand. Low-GI symbols are printed on labels voluntarily and stringent criteria are enforced for a food to be classified as low-GI. Canada endorsed a low-GI symbol in 2015.

The United States does not have a regulation for GI in place, nor does it define GI under the US’ Food and Drug Administration for regulatory labelling. Due to this, false GI claims in the US may violate its federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act that mandates labelling to be truthful, evidence-based, and not misleading.

Many nations do not have GI nutrition content claims incorporated in their food regulations, but countries like Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, and Taiwan use the certified trademark with low-GI symbols by Australia’s Glycaemic Index Foundation.

“There must be a move by the government or universities to pledge for mandatory labelling of GI in foods,” Viola said.

“Need to do it soon. It needs to be started by somebody as a champion. Need to ask Non-Communicable Disease people to do it as it is concerning diabetes.”

Rajen expressed similar sentiments, saying that low-GI labels should be permitted with proof of research and testing.

“The companies should be allowed to make claims and the consumers should be allowed to make a choice. Allow us to educate the consumers,” he concluded.

Despite the lack of regulation and recognition of low-GI food in Malaysia, some food items imported from overseas and sold in local stores here, such as a popular malt beverage, bear the “low GI” label.

“*Roti canai* is a favourite Malaysian food – enjoyed all the time by all the races. It has also been implicated in the rise of our diabetes and obesity rates. We really worked hard and invested heavily and this would be a fantastic ‘Malaysia Boleh’ story,” said Rajen.

“It is a shame to have these scientifically validated claims rejected on the basis that it would ‘confuse customers’. Malaysians are smart. They are connected to the world. We are only offering them a healthier choice.”