

# Lunchtime with colleagues, a thing of the past?

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At a shopping mall in Ara Damansara, Petaling Jaya in Selangor, the food court is bustling with its usual lunchtime crowd.

Most of those queuing at stalls and seated at tables are office workers although there are also a handful of shoppers who have stopped for a quick bite before resuming their errands.

Where just an hour ago there was only silence, the place now rings with the sound of laughter and conversation, accompanied by the clang of forks and spoons on plates.

But while many office workers are out with their colleagues, many tables meant to seat four or even six are occupied by only one person.

Unlike the crowds of laughing, chattering co-workers, they have come to enjoy their lunch alone.

Teo Kai Xin, an assistant at an aesthetic clinic, is one of them.

For three years, she has eaten lunch in her own company and she prefers it that way.

"It's easy and it saves time because I don't need to wait for my friends to finish eating," she said.

"I have more time to do other things. I call my child who normally gets home from school around then, and I ask how things are in the house."

Recalling the days when she used to have lunch with her friends, Teo said things were always chaotic and she had to spend a long time chatting and waiting for them to finish their meals.

But for the last few years, eating alone has been considered a new lifestyle in the modern world.

The habit begins even before work, with commuters scoffing down sandwiches en route to the train station or as they weave their way through fellow pedestrians on the street.

Today's hectic schedules make it harder than ever for family members and friends to sit down for a meal together.

In Britain, for example, the 2016 Wellbeing Index found that nearly a third of adults eat alone.

Three years later, a similar survey conducted by the UK's National Centre for Social Research and Oxford Centre for Economic and Social History found that the number had increased to half.

In the US, meanwhile, the Hartman Group research organisation found that solo diners accounted for 27% of all restaurant visits.

In Malaysia, there are no specific studies on the trend of eating alone. However, data from food handling companies indicates that solo meal-times are on the rise.

A year before the Covid-19 pandemic, online food ordering platform Eatigo which has more than 700,000 users nationwide reported an increase in sales from solo customers since its launch in 2017.

It said anywhere from 8% to 15% of its users were solo customers, and that some 80% of them were between 25 and 35 years old and located in the Klang Valley.

When contacted by MalaysiaNow, Teo's boss said he had not noticed a particular preference for eating alone among his employees.

Ashman Wong and his wife, who have run the clinic since 2015, said they have 11 female employees, seven of whom are permanent staff.

His workers get an hour and 45 minutes off for lunch – more than enough time to eat, run errands and pray.

After learning of Teo's routine, though, he said he had realised a change in his employees' quality of work which he described as for the better.

"The clinic used to be empty at noon," he said. "Customers might come in at 1pm but find no one to greet them.

"Now, I do realise that when customers come, there is someone there to register them."

He also said he had noticed his employees eating alone in the pantry while watching television.

He said this "new norm" among his workers began after the pandemic, when he realised that they preferred to eat in the clinic instead of going to restaurants.

"Maybe they are worried about catching Covid-19," he said.

For Teo, though, it is more about getting a break from the pressures of work.

"When I am alone, I feel better," she said.

"It's not so strange, eating alone. Many people are comfortable with eating by themselves during their lunch break."

The operator of the chicken rice stall at the food court who introduced himself as Huzman said he had had dozens of customers each day eating alone even before the onset of the pandemic.

At first, he feared that this would mean losses, but his concerns were soon allayed.

"I still get a normal amount of orders," he said. "Even though they eat alone, some of them also order more to take back with them."

"Some also make orders on behalf of their friends. So I haven't had to worry about losses."