

Noodles: Friend or foe? South Koreans defend diet

By Foster Klug and Jung-yoon Choi
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Kim Min-koo has an easy reply to new American research that hits South Korea where it hurts — in the noodles. Drunk and hungry just after dawn, he rips the lid off a bowl of his beloved fast food, wobbling on his feet but still defiant over a report that links instant noodles to health hazards.

“There’s no way any study is going to stop me from eating this,” says Kim, his red face beaded with sweat as he adds hot water to his noodles in a Seoul convenience store. His mouth waters, wooden chopsticks poised above the softening strands, his glasses fogged by steam. At last, he spears a slippery heap, lets forth a mighty, noodle-cooling blast of air, and starts slurping.

“This is the best moment — the first bite,” Kim, a freelance film editor who indulges about five times a week, says between gulps. “The taste, the smell, the chewiness — it’s just perfect.”

Instant noodles carry a broke college student aura in America, but they are an essential, even passionate, part of life for many in South Korea and across Asia. Hence the emotional heartburn caused by a Baylor Heart and Vascular Hospital study in the United States that linked instant-noodle consumption by South Koreans to some risks for heart disease.

The study has provoked feelings of wounded pride, mild guilt, stubborn resistance, even nationalism among South Koreans, who eat more instant noodles per capita than anyone in the world. Many of those interviewed vowed, like Kim, not to quit. Other noodle lovers offered up tech-



INSTANT COMFORT. Japanese instant-ramen-noodle expert Masaya “Sokusekikai” Oyama, 55, eats instant ramen noodles at a shop and restaurant specializing only in varieties of instant noodles in Tokyo. Oyama knows a lot about the instant noodle. He eats more than 400 servings of instant noodles a year, and he usually goes by his nickname “Sokusekikai,” which means “instant.” He agrees eating only instant noodles is not good for your health, because eating one thing all the time isn’t healthy, no matter what it is. “You need nutritional balance,” he said. “You should eat other things, too.” (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Ko fills half his luggage with instant noodles for his international business travels, a lesson he learned after assuming on his first trip that three packages would suffice for six days. “Man, was I wrong. Since then, I always make sure I pack enough.”

The U.S. study was based on South Korean surveys from 2007 to 2009 of more than 10,700 adults between 19 and 64 years old, about half of them women. It found that people who ate a diet rich in meat, soda, and fried and fast foods, including instant noodles, were associated with an increase in abdominal obesity and LDL, or “bad,” cholesterol. Eating instant noodles more than twice a week was associated with a higher prevalence of metabolic syndrome, another heart risk factor, in women but not in men.

The study raises important questions, but can’t prove that instant noodles are to blame rather than the overall diets of people who eat lots of them, cautions Alice Lichtenstein, director of the cardiovascular nutrition lab at Tufts University in Boston.

“What’s jumping out is the sodium (intake) is higher in those who are consuming ramen noodles,” she says. “What we don’t

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niques they swore kept them healthy: taking Omega-3, adding vegetables, using less seasoning, avoiding the soup. Some dismissed the study because the hospital involved is based in cheeseburger-gobbling America.

The heated reaction is partly explained by the omnipresence of instant noodles, which, for South Koreans, usually mean the spicy, salty *ramyeon* that costs less than a dollar per package. Individually wrapped disposable bowls and cups are everywhere: internet cafés, libraries, trains, ice-skating rinks. Even at the halfway point of a trail snaking up South Korea’s highest mountain, hikers can refresh themselves with cup noodles.

Elderly South Koreans often feel deep nostalgia for instant noodles, which entered the local market in the 1960s as the

country began clawing its way out of the poverty and destruction of the Korean War into what’s now Asia’s fourth-biggest economy. Many vividly remember their first taste of the once-exotic treat, and hard-drinking South Koreans consider instant noodles an ideal remedy for aching, alcohol-laden bellies and subsequent hangovers.

Some people won’t leave the country without them, worried they’ll have to eat inferior noodles abroad. What could be better at relieving homesickness than a salty shot of *ramyeon*?

“*Ramyeon* is like *kimchi* to Koreans,” says Ko Dong-ryun, 36, an engineer from Seoul, referring to the spicy, fermented vegetable dish that graces most Korean meals. “The smell and taste create an instant sense of home.”



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