

By Dr TEE E SIONG

NON-communicable diseases (NCDs) now contribute to about three-quarters of total deaths in Malaysia, with the biggest contributor being cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), including heart attacks and stroke.

Other major NCDs include cancers and diabetes.

Over the past two decades, there has been a steady rise in major risk factors for NCDs, and the numbers of those afflicted with NCDs have reached alarming levels, especially for overweight/obesity, hypertension, high blood glucose level and high blood cholesterol level.

The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) in 2015 found that nearly 50% of the Malaysian adult population are overweight or obese.

Large scale studies among primary and secondary school children in the country have also reported a high prevalence of almost 30% of school children with overweight or obesity.

One of the main factors leading to this crisis is the bad eating habits among Malaysians, possibly contributed by the wide variety of our delicious, yet not-so-healthy food.

Hence, it is imperative for Malaysians to be aware of our situation and start eating healthily. Adopting a healthy diet is the only way to prevent NCDs.

Prevention should start with children from a young age. Parents should therefore cultivate healthy eating habits for all family members. You have to realise that only you can change your eating habit.

Back to basics

So, how can we start eating healthily?

First, you have to know the basic concept of healthy eating: balance, moderation, and variety (BMV).

By referring to the food pyramid, the concept of BMV can be applied to guide you with your choice of food and way of eating.

Balance: Practise a balanced diet by consuming food from all groups in the food pyramid to get the right nutrient balance.

You should eat more foods from the bottom levels of the food pyramid and less foods from higher levels. For example, you have to eat more servings of vegetables and fruits, and less fat and sugar.

Other than that, you should also balance your caloric intake and expenditure. You can maintain your weight by balancing your food consumption with daily physical activities and exercises.

However, keep in mind that balance does not imply that you can justify your consumption of unhealthy food with exercise.

Moderation: Be moderate in your diet by controlling the amounts of foods you consume, especially those that are high with sugar, salt and fat.

You should eat more grains and grain products like brown rice or wholemeal bread, because they are located at the bottom and widest level of the food pyramid.

However, you should make sure not to eat more than what your body needs. Follow the serving size as recommended in the food pyramid.

Moderation can be tough as there are temptations all around us. You need to be disciplined.

Just remember that overeating will result in increased risk to overweight, obesity, hypertension and high blood glucose, the main risk factors of NCDs.

Variety: Eat a variety of food from the food pyramid, as differ-

The art of eating healthily

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ent foods will provide different kinds of nutrients. You can get carbohydrates from grains, proteins from meat and dairy products, and fats from oil, which are all essential nutrients for the body.

Never skip vegetables and fruits, but also be sure that you consume an appropriate amount of proteins.

However, variety can also lead to overeating, as you can see at any all-you-can-eat buffet. So, remember to pick from a variety of healthy food for your diet.

In addition to using the food pyramid as a guide to achieve BMV, you should also use the My Healthy Plate concept as a guide when having daily meals. Use the quarter-quarter-half ratio from it.

For example, imagine a plate that you need to fill with rice and other foods for lunch. To apply the My Healthy Plate concept, fill up a

quarter of your plate with rice, another quarter with fish or meat, and the remaining half of the plate with vegetables and fruits.

My Healthy Plate can guide you to eat the appropriate amount of main food groups in each meal.

Remember the five rules!

The BMV principle above can guide you to eat smart and healthy. In addition, the following five rules can help put you on the right path towards adopting healthy eating habits.

Choose whole grains: There are many different types of carbs, such as simple carbs like sugar and complex carbs like rice.

Whole grains are the best source of carbs because they are high in dietary fibre, vitamins, minerals and several phytonutrients.

Whole grains are digested slow-

ly, keeping blood sugar and cholesterol level low, and reducing the risk of several NCDs.

Some examples of whole grains are oat, brown rice and barley.

Examples of products made from whole grains include wholemeal bread, whole grain cereals and biscuits.

Five-a-day for fruits and vegetables: Have two servings of fruits and three servings of vegetables daily. Fruits and vegetables can provide us with all kinds of essential nutrients like dietary fibre, vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients that may not be available in other food groups.

More power from plant protein: Eat more plant protein than animal protein. Studies have shown a link between excessive consumption of processed red meat and risks of CVDs and cancer.

People with high plant protein diets are also found to have a reduced risk of CVDs.

You can get plant protein from nuts, beans and legumes. Eating a mixture of such plant proteins will ensure that your body has the high quality amino acids (building blocks of protein) it needs.

Two-a-day for milk and dairy products: Have two servings of milk and dairy products daily.

Dairy products provide us with protein and calcium that are vital for our bones and muscles.

Less is more for S.O.S: Take less sugar, oil and salt. Excessive intake of these three ingredients can increase your blood sugar, cholesterol and blood pressure levels – the main risk factors of NCDs.

Other strategies

In addition to the above-mentioned strategies, there are various ways to ensure healthy eating in

your household.

You can serve food using smaller plates, cook your own meals using fresh and wholesome ingredients, stop eating before you are full, and replace salt with herbs and spices, among many other ways that you can try out with your family.

It has been well established that unhealthy dietary practices are the main cause of NCDs like heart disease, cancers and diabetes.

These diseases require long-term treatment that incur high costs, bring about premature death, cause immense human suffering, and result in a loss of income to families.

However, all is not lost because NCDs are preventable. Living a healthy lifestyle, including healthy eating and active living, prevents them.

The message is very clear: to prevent heart disease, cancers and diabetes, practise healthy eating habits. This is the only way you and your family can prevent NCDs. The choice is in your hands.

Dr Tee E Siong is Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2018 National Steering Committee chairman and Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) president. This article is contributed by NMM 2018, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by NSM, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA) and the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO). To obtain more information on healthy eating and active lifestyle, visit NMM's Food-Fit-Fun Fair at Main Atrium, Ground Floor, Sunway Velocity Mall, Kuala Lumpur, on March 21-25. Nutrition screening and counselling is available for free and lots of other goodies are up for grabs. Visit www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my or the NMM Facebook page for more information.