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**W**E all know the benefits of regular physical activity, yet many of us shy away from any form of exercise and physical activity. Coupled with an excessive caloric intake, an inactive or sedentary lifestyle can set you on the path towards becoming overweight or obese.

These weight problems will eventually lead to chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease (which include heart disease, high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol), diabetes and cancer.

Therefore, it is important that we try to move about more and be active in our daily lives.

Experts recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week (or 30 minutes, for at least five times a week). An example is to do some brisk walking 30 minutes a day.

Some experts also recommend aiming for 10,000 steps a day. A sedentary person usually walks 3,000 to 4,000 steps a day, so just add the extra steps for better health.

However, the Malaysian Adult Nutrition Survey (MANS) conducted in 2003 showed that only one out of six adults had adequate exercise. This goes to show that sedentary behaviour has become a norm in Malaysian society.

**Sedentary lifestyles**

According to the survey, sedentary activities take up the biggest chunk of our daily routine. Malaysian adults spend 10 hours of the day sitting down, and eight hours of the day either lying down or sleeping.

Low-intensity activities such as standing and personal care activities take up about four hours of the day. Moderate to vigorous intensity activities such as walking, stair-climbing and sports account for only two hours of the day.

The mode of transportation used also affects the frequency and intensity of daily physical activity. The MANS revealed that three out of four Malaysian adults used passive transportation such as a car or a motorcycle to move around.

The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2011 found that women were more physically inactive than men. Urban adults were found to be more inactive compared to rural adults.

Physical activity also decreased as people got older, especially senior citizens.

A major finding of this survey was that obesity in adults increased three-fold from 4.4% in 1996 to 15.1%, while overweight in adults increased two-fold from 16.6% to 29.4%.

**Why is physical activity so important?**

Low levels of physical activ-

# Move to fight fat

Physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight.

ity is a key contributor to obesity. We Malaysians enjoy eating, and with a variety of foods available throughout the day, we tend to overeat.

However, despite the increasing amount of food we consume, we do not balance this out with physical activity, as for many Malaysians, physical activity is still not a priority in their lives.

To maintain a healthy weight, you need to achieve a balance between your energy intake and energy expenditure. Energy intake is the amount of calories (measured by kilocalories, kcal) that you get from your food and drinks. Energy expenditure is the amount of energy your body burns for activities such as breathing, digesting, and being physically active.

More energy intake than expenditure will cause weight gain. Overweight and obesity occurs over time when you continuously consume more calories than you burn.

The Malaysian Dietary Guidelines recommend a daily energy intake of 2,000-2,500kcal for an adult male, and 1,500-2,000kcal for an adult female.

However, other factors such as body size and physical activity level can influence the amount of calories your body needs and burns.

Physical activity is the most easily modifiable factor that can increase the amount of calories your body burns in daily life. Being physically active also helps to lower your risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure and cancer, as well as reduce stress.

**Where do I start?**

Being physically active

is not that difficult. All you really need is some determination and an understanding of the physical activity pyramid. This will provide insight as to how you can get started on being physically active daily.

The pyramid highlights four key components in physical activity:

**1. Be active daily, anytime and anywhere**

You should try to be active every day in as many ways as you can. Any type of physical activity can help you burn calories. Some activities that you can incorporate into your daily routine include taking the stairs instead of taking the lift or escalator, walking or cycling to work or the shops instead of driving, and parking your car a distance away from your destination to promote walking.

Doing housework such as gardening, sweeping or mopping the floor, and handwashing clothes without the help of automated machines can increase your daily

caloric expenditure. A normal person walks 6,000 to 7,000 steps a day. So, walk at least 10,000 steps a day for better health.

**2. Work your heart out five to six times a week**

Do some moderate intensity aerobic activity for at least 30 minutes, five to six times a week. Aerobic exercises not only help you burn more calories, they also improve your stamina and exercise your muscles.

Activities you can do include playing badminton, brisk walking, cycling, sepak takraw, swimming and tennis.

When your fitness improves, you can also increase the intensity level of your physical activities and the amount of time you spend on them. For example, aim for 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activities that will make you huff and puff, such as jogging, playing football, squash, tennis, netball or basketball, every day.

**3. Stretch your muscles and build up your strength and endurance two to three times a week**

Some activities also help to build your endurance and muscle strength, and improve flexibility too. So, for two to three times a week, do some strength exercises like boxing or working out with weights, a fitness ball or exercise bands.

Try workouts that use your own body weight such as push-ups, sit-ups, lunges or squats. Take up martial arts, dance, tai chi or yoga to improve your body's flexibility.

You could also include running, marathons and distance cycling to increase your endurance level. Spread out these endurance activities to avoid excessive fatigue and to reduce the risk of injury. Choose activities that you like doing and do them regularly.

**4. Limit physical inactivity**

Most importantly, you should limit any physical inactivity and sedentary habits. Keep sedentary activities like watching television, sitting, lying down or surfing the internet to a maximum of two hours or less a day.

While watching television or working at the computer, make an attempt to do some simple stretching or sit-ups at intervals.

There are plenty of opportunities for you to engage in some form of physical activity every day, one way or another.

To maintain a healthy weight, all you need to do is become physically active and eat healthily. It's not about not having enough time to be physically active; it's about making the time for it.

So make a decision to lead a healthier life today. Be active in any way you can and try to eat healthily wherever you are.

By planning carefully and pacing yourself, you can establish a healthy habit that will last a lifetime.

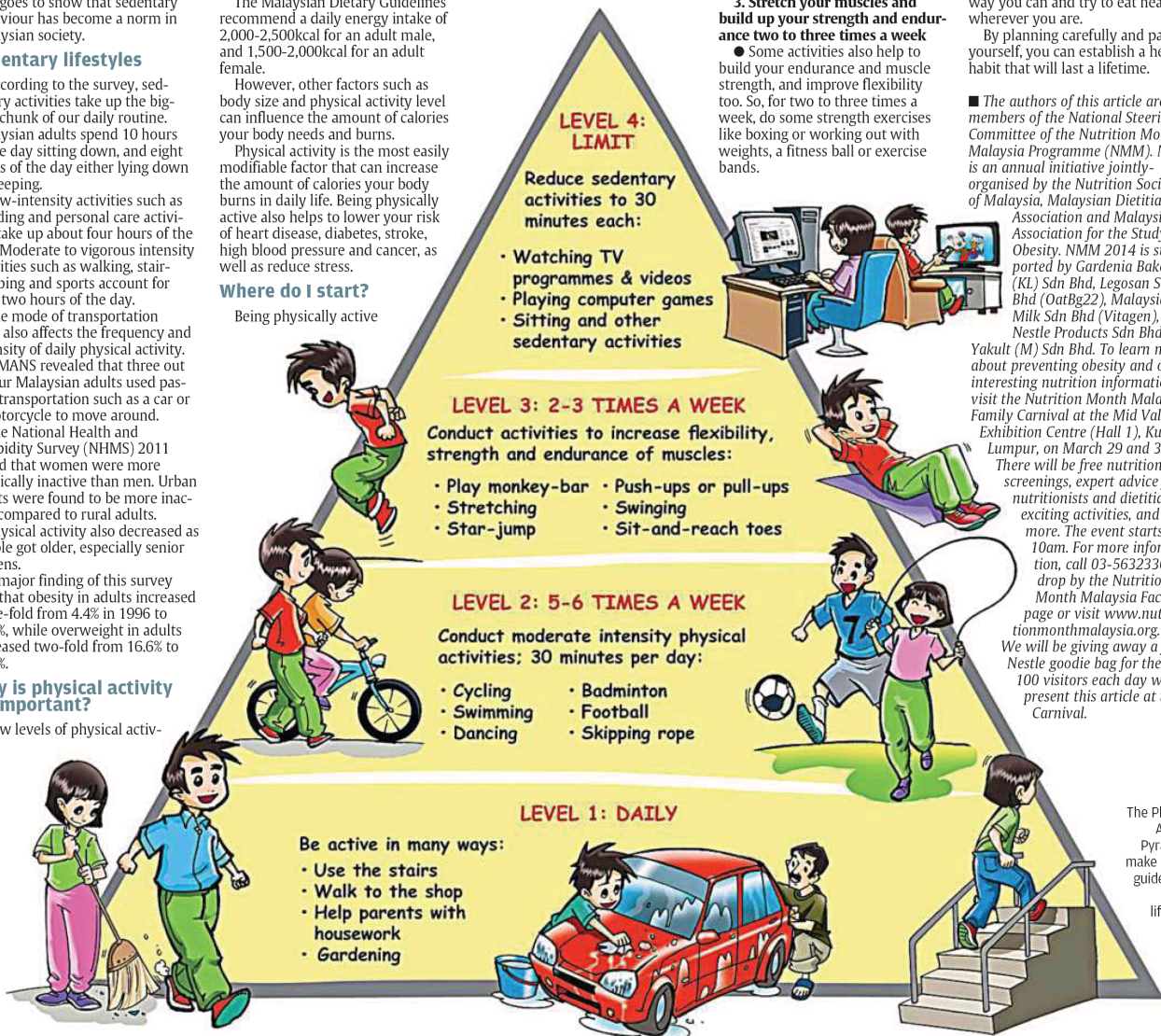
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To learn more about preventing obesity and other interesting nutrition information, visit the Nutrition Month Malaysia Family Carnival at the Mid Valley Exhibition Centre (Hall 1), Kuala Lumpur, on March 29 and 30.

There will be free nutrition screenings, expert advice from nutritionists and dietitians, exciting activities, and much more. The event starts from 10am. For more information, call 03-56323301, drop by the Nutrition Month Malaysia Facebook page or visit [www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my](http://www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my).

We will be giving away a free Nestle goodie bag for the first 100 visitors each day who present this article at the Carnival.



The Physical Activity Pyramid - make it your guide to an active lifestyle.