

Preventing lifestyle diseases

Don't be a statistic, start living a healthier lifestyle today.

By Dr TEE E SIONG

RJ, 33 years old, was highly dedicated to his job and lived a very hectic lifestyle. He frequently ate outside, grabbing quick meals from hawker stalls, coffee shops, cafes and fast food restaurants. Or he just skipped meals. He never had time for exercise and was overweight. He was also a heavy smoker, and frequently used the excuse that cigarettes helped him deal with stress.

Then one day, he suffered severe chest pain and collapsed. His colleagues rushed him to the hospital. Upon checking, the doctor revealed that he has partial blockage of his blood vessels and suffered a heart attack during his meeting.

RJ's lifestyle is characteristic of many working Malaysians who tend to focus more on their careers than their health. This lack of concern for their health is extremely worrying. It is because of this that incidences of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart diseases have been on the rise.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are diet-related chronic diseases and the main ones include obesity, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and cancers. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than nine million deaths worldwide attributed to NCDs occur before the age of 60.

NCD crisis in Malaysia

In Malaysia, diet-related chronic diseases are prevalent amongst Malaysian adults, regardless of age, gender, or race. For instance, it was found that heart attacks and strokes are amongst the top five causes of death in Malaysia. The 2011 report of the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) shows clear indications of the rise in NCDs and its risk factors.

According to the survey, the prevalence for the following has increased compared to previous years:

- Diabetes – increased from 11.6% (2006) to 15.2%.
- Hypertension in adults above 30 years old – increased from 32.2% (2006) to 32.7%.
- Obesity – increased more than three-fold from 4.4% (1996) to 15.1%.

These changes have been occurring in our country over the past few decades, but the most worrying fact is that most Malaysians do not realise their health is in danger.

Root of the problem

Your background, lifestyle, and the environment are all factors that are known to affect your chances of developing certain NCDs. Some of the factors which contribute to NCDs are beyond our control, and these include factors such as age, gender, race, and family history.

On the other hand, some factors are well within our control and we can choose to reduce our risk of NCDs if we take the appropriate actions. The factors that are within our control basically involve our lifestyle, which includes physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, smoking, excessive stress and excessive alcohol intake.

Lack of control of these factors results in raised blood glucose, high blood lipids, raised blood pressure, and overweight or obesity.

Many Malaysians just seem to be oblivious to the truth and continue to indulge in an unhealthy lifestyle. The proof of this is in the rising statistics for the risk factors of NCDs. The 2011 NHMS found that about 6.2 million Malaysians suffer from high blood cholesterol and 2.5 million are obese.

How did these colossal numbers come about? It is mostly due to Malaysians having an excessive intake of fat, oils, salt and refined carbohydrates (eg white rice, sugar, white



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bread) in their daily diet. More Malaysians are now eating out more frequently, and hence have little control over the content of these ingredients in local dishes or fast foods.

In addition to our tendency to eat out, we are also consuming larger portion sizes, resulting in consumption of unnecessary calories. Lack of physical activity further exacerbates this problem. It's no wonder that many Malaysian adults now suffer from NCDs and its risk factors.

Seven steps to a healthier lifestyle

So what should you concentrate your efforts on? The only sensible solution to prevent NCDs is to focus on reducing the risk factors that you can change, namely your diet and level of physical activity.

Other aspects that you should also look at are learning how to manage your stress levels, getting enough sleep, and quitting smoking.

To begin, you will need to take note of the following:

1. Know where you stand

This is the first step in preventing NCDs. Go for health screening to find out the status of your health at least once a year. Talk to your doctor to find out the normal ranges and what they mean. This will help you understand what goes on in your body.

Once you've determined where you stand,

you are one step closer to making changes to your lifestyle.

2. Eat right

Many people equate healthy eating with eating bland, boring, and unexciting foods. What healthy eating really entails is getting the necessary "BMV" in your meals. It basically means going for Balanced meals, in Moderate amounts, and with a Variety of foods based on the Malaysian Food Pyramid.

And, eating right does not have to be expensive too!

Other things to look out for in your food choices include:

- Getting your daily dose of fibre for healthy body weight, good digestion and a healthy heart.
- Cutting down your sugar intake to avoid unnecessary calorie intake that could lead to weight gain.
- Using less salt in your meals; instead, spice up your food with herbs and spices.
- Limiting intake of high fat foods to maintain a healthy body weight and heart.

3. Fight NCDs by staying fit and active

Physical activity improves cardiovascular fitness, strength and flexibility, and burns up calories to keep you fit and trim. This leaves you looking, feeling and thinking better.

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When your fitness improves, the intensity and amount of time spent on physical activity can be gradually increased. If you want to lose weight, the duration of physical activity should be at least 60 minutes daily.

Limit physical inactivity and any sedentary habits like watching television, or working at the computer to no more than two hours a day. Also try to be active as much as you can every day in as many ways as possible, eg taking the stairs, doing household chores, washing your car, etc.

Remember that every bit of physical activity counts.

4. Rest and relax

Prolonged stress has been identified as a factor that increases the risk of NCDs, especially heart diseases. Most adults agree that

modern living can be rather stressful. Coping with certain amounts of stress is acceptable, but with prolonged exposure to excessive levels, it mostly definitely becomes harmful.

Some of the ways you can handle stress are to find a companion to share your thoughts or go for a short holiday to relax yourself.

5. Don't light that next cigarette

Although smoking seems like a harmless puff of fun, each stick contains thousands of chemicals that destroy healthy organs. Smoking can clog up your arteries, reduce blood flow, and cause addiction.

6. Avoid alcohol intake

Too much alcohol does just the same as smoking, and increases your risk of developing NCDs. If you attend gatherings occasionally, choose non-alcoholic beverages or learn how to limit your alcohol intake.

7. Get a good night's sleep

The quality of your sleep directly affects the quality of your waking life. This includes mental sharpness, productivity, emotional balance, creativity and physical vitality. Hence, make sure you get sufficient sleep in order to wake up feeling refreshed.

These are the seven little steps you need to take to get started on a healthier you. Let's make a change today. Live healthy and stay free from NCDs.

To learn more about other interesting nutrition information, take part in the Nutrition Month Malaysia "Eat Right, Be Active: Stay Free From Diet Related Disease" Family Carnival at the Mid Valley Exhibition Centre (Hall 1) on Saturday and Sunday, May 3 and 4, 2013. There will be free nutrition screenings, expert advice from nutritionists and dietitians, exciting activities, and much more. For more information, call 03-5632 3301 or visit www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my.

■ Dr Tee E Siong is president of Nutrition Society of Malaysia and chairman of Nutrition Month Malaysia Steering Committee. This article is courtesy of Nutrition Month Malaysia 2013, an annual community nutrition education programme organised by Nutrition Society of Malaysia, Malaysian Dietitians' Association and Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity.