6 Food For Thought STARHEALTH, SUNDAY 25 JUNE 2023

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HEALTHY nutrition is the cornerstone of good health at all stages of life

Nutrition plays a vital role starting from the womb and continuing through infancy until old

While nutritional needs change at different life stages, good nutrition, in general, ensures optimal growth and development, normal bodily functions, a healthy immune system and healthy ageing.

Good nutrition also prevents nutrient deficiencies and dietrelated chronic diseases.

However, due to various factors, many of us find it hard to practise a healthy lifestyle and incorporate good nutrition in our

This can lead to nutritional imbalances in the long run, and as a result, two forms of malnutrition problems can happen: undernutrition (i.e. wasting, stunting, underweight and/or micronutrient deficiencies) and overnutrition (i.e. overweight or obesity).

Malnutrition is the main driver of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure), heart disease, cancer and chronic respiratory disease.

The bad news is that we're facing a double burden of malnutrition in Malaysia, i.e. both underand overnutrition, contributing to the worrying levels of these diseases in our country.

Thus, it is important to practise healthy nutrition throughout life to prevent both malnutrition and

Let's see how nutrition can play a role at different stages of life to ensure one's lifelong health and well-being.

In the womb

A mother's nutrient intake before and during pregnancy lays the earliest foundation for her child's healthy growth and development.

This is because a mother's diet is the only source of nutrition for the fetus.

Hence, during pregnancy, mothers have increased calorie and nutrient needs to support the growth and development of their foetus.

A poor diet during pregnancy that is lacking in key nutrients such as iron, folate and calcium, can result in complications like anaemia and pre-eclampsia in the mother, as well as issues like low birth weight and developmental delays in the baby.

On the other hand, increased calorie and nutrient needs do not mean that mothers need to "eat for two" or double their food portion during pregnancy.

The increased needs can generally be met through the addition of healthy snacks, i.e. one healthy snack in the first trimester, two healthy snacks in the second trimester and three healthy snacks during the third trimes-

Excessive intake could lead to excessive pregnancy weight gain, which can increase health risks in both the mother and fetus.

Women of reproductive age who are planning for pregnancy should aim for normal weight status before getting pregnant and practise healthy eating.

Meanwhile, expecting mums should ensure they are gaining the appropriate weight, according to their pre-pregnancy weight, throughout the pregnan-

This is to ensure a healthier pregnancy and reduce health risks for both mother and baby.

Infants and toddlers

This stage of life is a key period of rapid growth and development in children.

Good nutrition during this period is crucial to ensure optimal physical growth and cognitive develop-

This starts with exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life in order to provide all the essential nutrients to baby for her growth and development.

Continued breastfeeding up to the age of two years, together with complementary feeding from six months of age onwards, is also recommended.

The timely introduction of complementary feeding with a variety of nutrient-rich foods is crucial when infants transition to solid foods.

This sets up the basis for a lifetime of healthy eating habits

Otherwise, nutritional imbalances during this period can lead to several issues like being underweight, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, as well as poor cognitive development and learning capability.

School-going children

Children at this stage of life are usually very active and energetic. Thus, they have

increased nutrient needs to promote optimal growth and development.

A balanced and varied diet is vital to provide them with all the nutrients needed, which then will support their healthy growth, maintain energy levels for learning, enhance cognitive development, prevent childhood obesity and reduce the risk of chronic diseases later in life.

This is also a period when children are learning and adopting new habits, thus parents should take this opportunity to shape their eating habits.

Without proper nutrition, their learning capabilities may be affected and other nutritional issues may arise.

Teenagers

This is the second most rapid growth period in one's life

A child reaches puberty during this period and experiences growth spurts, resulting in an increased need for nutrients.

A balanced and varied diet that includes adequate amounts of carbohydrates, proteins and fats, along with calcium, vitamin D, iron and other key nutrients, are essential to support growth, bone health and school performance, as well as health and well-being in general.

Good nutrition during adoles-

and obese can also be nutrition. As teens become more

> and are prone to developing eating disor-

Thus, the teenage years are an important period for healthy food choices

terns that are developed during adolescence will be

Healthy nutrition remains integral to maintaining overall health throughout adulthood.

Good nutrition supports physical vitality, promotes strong immunity, helps maintain healthy body weight and reduces the



after infancy.

cence also helps reduce the risk girls, who have a higher risk due

This is another crucial period in one's life. At this stage, the impact of healthy nutrition becomes even more

risk of chronic diseases. However, many adults are

busy with work and do not

Regardless, that should not be

an excuse; there are many ways

to be healthy even with a busy

Otherwise, imbalances in

increased risks of overweight,

obesity and related metabolic

performance at work due to

Hence, it is important for

adults to make time for eating

This way, one can lead an

active and productive life as an

right and make it a top priority

nutrient intake can lead to

This will lead to poor

fatigue and illnesses.

really have time to lead a

healthy lifestyle.

schedule.

diseases.

in life.

adult.

Elderly

significant. Older persons are more prone to health issues such as reduced bone density, age-related muscle loss, a

weakened immune system and risk of cognitive impairment.

Healthy nutrition helps to reduce risk or delay these health issues, enabling one to stay healthy and independent for longer.

Hence, to maintain optimal health, a strong immune system and reduce the risk of diseases, a nutrient-dense diet and adequate hydration are essential for the elderly.

On top of that, there are changes in dietary needs as we grow older, such as increased need for certain nutrients and decreased need for calories.

The types and textures of foods consumed may also need to be modified appropriately, e.g. softer foods for easier chewing.

In a nutshell, nutrition affects our well-being at every stage of

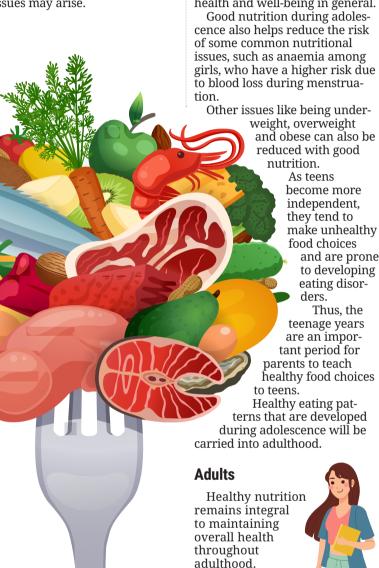
But it is important to know that different age groups may have different nutritional

Practising a healthy lifestyle is not complicated.

What's important is to start making an effort with small, gradual changes in our life.

By prioritising healthy nutrition, we can optimise health, reduce risk of diseases and increase our quality of life, regardless of our age.

Associate Professor Dr Mahenderan Appukutty is a nutritionist and Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) vice-president. This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2023, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by NSM, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association and the **Malaysian Society of Body** Composition. Today is the final day of NMM's Food-Fit-Fun Fair, which is being held in Sunway Velocity Mall, Kuala Lumpur. For more information, visit www. nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my



Nutrition needs for all ages

The calories and nutrients that we require can vary at different stages of our life.