

By Dr TEE E SIONG

AS Malaysians, we enjoy relatively cheap public healthcare and pride ourselves on globally high-ranked health services.

Despite some shortcomings, our nation's healthcare system has been improving and advancing since Merdeka.

However, much of the healthcare system has been focusing on curative care.

Most of us look for medical assistance only when we are ill, and some even prefer to wait until we are very unwell before seeking help from healthcare professionals.

Many people are oblivious of the importance of prevention in healthcare, leading to the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and related risk factors, which are the main health issues in the country.

The effect of this mindset can be seen from recent statistics.

The 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) shows that one in five Malaysian adults have diabetes, three in 10 adults have hypertension (high blood pressure), and two in five adults have elevated cholesterol levels.

Even more alarming, one in two adults are either overweight or obese, which are significant risk factors to developing NCDs.

Even the younger age groups are not spared, as around 30% of children aged five to 17 years are either overweight or obese.

These trends have financial consequences too.

Hospitalisations, medical tests, medications and consultations resulting from NCDs cost the Malaysian economy upwards of RM9.65 billion annually, according to Finance Ministry and World Health Organization (WHO) estimates in 2022.

Treatment and medical care can be very expensive even after being subsidised by the government, especially for those who are uninsured.

As a result, this can negatively impact the living circumstances of the patient and their family.

Hence, rather than spending expensive fees on treatment, a cost-saving alternative that we should all follow is to practise healthy lifestyle habits as preventive measures against illnesses.

In fact, many of the costly NCDs are actually preventable by implementing the right habits and preventive steps in our lives.

These include practising healthy eating habits, being physically active, going for regular health check-ups, completing immunisations, and avoiding alcohol and tobacco.

These practices help us to stay healthy, productive and active, prevent health issues, and reduce medical and healthcare costs, thus enabling us to save more to enjoy our golden years.

Nutrition for health

Healthy nutrition plays a very important role in maintaining health and preventing diseases.

This is true throughout our lifespan, even before we are born.

Healthy nutrition contributes to foetal and maternal health during pregnancy, ensuring a safer pregnancy and a healthier newborn.

Nutrition also plays a significant role in child health, growth and development, especially during the early years of life.

And with better nutrition, the risks of NCDs like diabetes and cardiovascular (heart) diseases during adulthood are reduced, resulting in better quality of life and improved longevity.

On the other hand, poor nutrition practices lead to malnutrition, which can be either undernutrition or overnutrition.

This includes wasting and stunting in children, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, anaemia in pregnant women and children, overweight and obesity (which can occur at any age, even in young children), sarcopenia in the elderly, and so on.

Let us move away from seeking treatment when unwell to preventing ourselves from becoming sick in the first place.

Ultimately, this increases the risk of developing NCDs and reduces quality of life.

Everyone can and should practise healthy nutrition as a way to prevent diseases and maintain good health.

Here are some tips to help you start.

Firstly, do try to follow the dietary guidelines.

These are evidence-based dietary advices that can help us meet individual nutritional needs for healthy body functions and prevention of NCDs.

Some key recommendations are summarised here:

- > Practise BMV (balance, moderation, variety) when having meals by including all food groups according to the recommendations and following the quarter-quarter-half healthy plate concept.
- > Prioritise healthier options by consuming more vegetables and fruits, choos-

ing whole grains instead of refined grains, and fish and lean meat, instead of processed meat.

- > When cooking at home, use healthier methods like steaming, grilling or stewing, which use less oil than deep-frying. Do prepare meals at home more often!
- > Limit salt, sugar, fat and oil when cooking dishes.
 - Substitute with herbs and spices as the seasoning when cooking.
- > Drink sufficient water daily.
 - Plain water should be the main option. Reduce your intake of sugar-sweetened beverages.
 - Consume milk and dairy products like yoghurt or cheese daily.
- > Be mindful of salt, sugar and fat content in packaged foods.
 - Read and compare nutrition information on food labels when choosing pre-packaged food products.
 - Choose products with less sugar and

salt content per 100 millilitres or per 100 grammes.

In addition to the steps above, you can also practise these tips at your workplace:

> Look for eateries with healthy options near your workplace.

Choose dishes prepared with healthier cooking methods and limit deep-fried foods or dishes.

Apply the healthy plate concept when having *nasi campur* or economy rice.

> Do not skip meals as this can make you hungrier during the next meal, thus leading to overeating.

Even if you are short of time, it's better to have a simple, balanced breakfast or lunch than nothing at all.

For example, you can have a bowl of cereal and milk with nuts/fruit as toppings for breakfast, and egg and vegetable sandwiches with a pack of milk for lunch.

> Snacks may be required, but consume them in moderation.

And choose healthier snacks, e.g. bananas, raisins, nuts, etc.

Lastly, do instil good eating habits in your children.

Childhood is an important period when young ones start to form their eating habits and patterns, which will then become the foundation of their health in the future.

Thus, parents play a major role in providing a supportive learning environment and promoting healthy nutrition to kids as young as possible.

Keep these tips in mind:

> Get children involved in food selection and preparation as a way to teach them about healthy nutrition.

Bring them along when shopping for groceries and share with them tips for making healthier choices.

> Provide healthier snacks at home.

Keep stocks of bite-sized fresh fruits, dried fruits and crackers for snacking.

Snacks like chocolates, cookies and chips should only be consumed occasionally.

> For school, prepare healthier home-cooked/packed lunchboxes for your child.

You can also teach your child to make healthier food choices at the canteen.

> Be a good role model to your child by practising these healthy nutrition tips yourself.

Other tips

Do also try to be physically active every day. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activities per week.

This includes jogging, playing badminton, swimming or cycling, which should ideally be done throughout the week.

Don't forget muscle-strengthening exercises too.

Keep yourself updated with the latest information, knowledge and skills on nutrition and health.

Refer to credible sources of information backed by experts and research.

Beware of fad diets, overclaims and unscrupulous advertising.

All these tips and recommendations are preventive measures that can help us stay healthy longer and prevent the development of serious and chronic diseases, which are costly to treat and manage.

Good health is a gift that should be treasured and everyone has the responsibility to take care of their own health.

As the saying goes, "Prevention is better than cure."

Dr Tee E Siong is a nutritionist and chairman of the Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2023 steering committee. This article is contributed by NMM 2023, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition. NMM's Food-Fit-Fun Fair will be held in Sunway Velocity Mall, Kuala Lumpur, on June 22-25. For more information, visit www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my.

