



The country's major annual consumer nutrition promotion campaign

## **Don't Delay! Take Steps to Prevent Diet-Related Diseases Now**

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Most people surely must have heard of this old proverb, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” which illustrates that it is better to stop a problem from happening than to stop or correct it after it has started. This adage rings true in many situations, particularly in disease prevention.

### **Shifting the prevailing mindset**

In Malaysia, the prevailing mindset among the majority is curative care, where the focus is to cure diseases or treat symptoms once they occur, instead of preventive care, which aims to prevent diseases before they happen. It is common for many people to practise the ‘wait-and-see’ approach and delay until they are very ill before seeking medical advice. This may result in deterioration of the symptoms, worsened health outcomes, as well as costly treatment which may drag on for long durations.

We need to change the prevailing mindset of sick-care if we are to effectively tackle the serious health challenge of double burden of malnutrition (DBM) afflicting the population. This refers to the concurrent existence of undernutrition (including wasting, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies) alongside overnutrition (overweight, obesity and associated NCDs) at all stages of the life cycle. The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) reports of Ministry of Health have reported the high prevalence of these problems over the years, or even decades.

For children under 5 years, the 2022 NHMS report has highlighted the problem of growth retardation, as reflected in the persistent high prevalence of underweight, stunting and wasting. The high prevalence of 21% of stunting among these young children is of particular concern. The same report also indicated that almost half of these children were classified to have mild and moderate iron-deficiency anaemia. On the other hand, the survey also reported a prevalence of 6% of overweight and obesity amongst these children.

Among school-age children, a rise in the prevalence of overweight and obesity have been reported in NHMS reports. These surveys, as well as the research study of Nutrition Society of Malaysia have reported a high prevalence of up to 30% among these children. In the meantime, 6.5% of these children may be underweight.

The NHMS studies have also reported a continuous rise in overweight and obesity among adults over the decades, and a high prevalence of 51% in the 2019 report. The report also highlighted the high prevalence of NCD risk factors, documenting that 1 in 5 adult Malaysians have diabetes, while 1 in 3 suffer from hypertension and raised blood cholesterol. It is no surprise, therefore, that NCDs have been the major cause of death and disability in Malaysia. On the other extreme, the same NHMS reported some 6.5% of adults were found to be underweight, whilst 3 in 10 women of reproductive age were anaemic, resulting from iron deficiency in the diet.

The Health White Paper 2023 of the Ministry of Health has highlighted that the rising rates of NCDs in chronic stages have increased the cost of care per patient significantly due to the cost of treatment and prescription drugs, as well as the cost of management of long-term complications such as cardiovascular and chronic kidney diseases. This high cost of curative care has seriously impacted the government, as well as bringing about heavy financial burden to the patients and family members.

Hence, there needs to be a shift of mindset, from curative care to preventive care, which is way cheaper and more efficient. Everyone needs to play a pivotal role in fostering this change by committing to preventive way of thinking and promoting it to people around them. This paradigm shift must begin at home with ourselves, which we can do by simply practising a healthier lifestyle, especially among children. So, how do we start?

### **Know your body & health status**

Knowing your body is the first step towards disease prevention. By doing regular medical check-ups and health screening, you will be able to detect any potential issue at an early stage before symptoms show up. This enables you to take the necessary measures to address the issue. Everyone is recommended to do regular medical check-ups, the frequency depending on several factors, like age, occupation and family history of NCDs. Seek the advice of your health-care professional.

During a medical check-up, your doctor may discuss with you about your medical history and lifestyle practices including, physical activity, as well as alcohol and tobacco use. Various tests are available and can be taken based on your doctor's recommendation, including certain tests which can alert you of any risk of NCDs. There are also various simple measurements that we can carry out ourselves at home. These include regular monitoring of body weight status and even blood pressure level.

### **You are what you eat**

Your dietary habit is key to preventive care. By practising healthy eating habits, NCDs and undernutrition can be prevented. Here are some general tips from the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines 2020:

- **Eat more veggies and fruits.** Did you know that 95% of Malaysians do not meet the recommended vegetables and fruits daily intake? This may not be surprising because many do not give importance to consuming these. Fruits and vegetables are rich in fibre, phytonutrients, vitamins and minerals and are generally lower in calorie and fat. We should consume at least 3 servings of vegetables and 2 servings of fruits every day. To promote the consumption of veggies and fruits among family members, parents should aim to serve at least one vegetable-based dish and prepare fresh fruits as desserts during family meal times. Aim to serve more of these during festive occasions too. Change your mindset by making vegetables and fruits as the highlight of your meals.
- **Choose whole grains.** Whole grains are an important source of energy, protein, micronutrients, fibre, as well as phytonutrients. Consumption of whole grains has been shown to reduce the risks of NCDs and related risk factors. It is therefore recommended that at least half of our intake of cereal and cereal-based products should come from whole grains. To increase your whole grain intake, choose brown rice and whole grain alternatives when buying noodles, breads, breakfast cereals, biscuits and cakes.
- **Increase plant-based protein intake.** When we talk about our protein intake, we often think of, foods like meat, poultry, eggs, fish and shellfish. These are animal-based protein foods. However, plant-based protein foods like legumes and nuts are also good sources of protein with many health benefits including having lower saturated fat and calorie, no cholesterol, and containing dietary fibre and phytonutrients. Due to potential health risks associated with red meat and processed meat, substitute these with legumes such as soybeans, lentils and chickpeas as your protein source. Try to have at least a serving of legumes daily as part of your protein intake in combination with healthy animal-based protein foods.
- **Limit intake of SOS.** It is well known that excessive consumption of salt, oil and sugar (SOS) can increase the risk of developing NCDs. Do make effort to limit your SOS intake through these measures:
  - Salt: Reduce the amount of salt and sauces in cooking; instead, use natural spices and herbs to enhance flavours.
  - Oil and fat: Choose cooking methods that use less cooking oil such as grilling and air frying, instead of deep frying and batter frying. Use lean cuts of meats.
  - Sugar: Avoid adding sugars while cooking and opt for less sugar when buying foods and beverages.

- When eating out, ask for less SOS in foods and drinks.
- **Do portion control.** Know the appropriate serving size for your daily meals, depending on your recommended daily calorie intake based on your weight, age, gender and occupation and lifestyle. Be mindful portion size when eating and do not overeat, especially at events serving buffet-style meals.
- **Don't skip meals.** A person usually will have 3-5 meals daily, which may include breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, depending on their dietary habit. Try to follow a regular meal schedule and do not skip any main meals as this may lead to excessive snacking or overeating during the next meal.

### **Be physically active too**

Apart from your dietary intake, it is vital to practise an active lifestyle too. An active lifestyle combined with healthy eating leads to a wholesome lifestyle that helps to prevent disease and promote well-being. Firstly, aim to be active daily. Try to include at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. One easy way to achieve this is by brisk walking after work or dinner. During the weekend, choose to spend time with family and friends by doing outdoor activities or sports. To motivate yourself to exercise, set daily or weekly targets or goals, e.g. walking 10,000 steps daily, jogging 3 times a week, etc.

### **Do not procrastinate!**

All of us know and understand that prevention is better than cure. Instead of spending time, energy and money on medications and treatments due to illnesses, it certainly makes more sense to simply practise healthy living. Many are aware of the importance of healthy eating and have probably come across such messages many times previously. But how many people actually take the action to practise these advices? Many probably don't, or are not consistent in adopting such practices. And this is one of the reasons why there is still such high prevalence of NCDs in the country.

Only those who are willing to change their mindset from curative to preventive and take the necessary actions to eat healthy and lead an active lifestyle will reap the benefits. Don't delay any longer if we want to avoid spending large amounts of money and long periods of treating NCDs in the years to come. Take steps today towards a healthy lifestyle for ourselves and our family members. Stick to these healthy eating and lifestyle plans – be disciplined.

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This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2024, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA) and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition (MSBC).

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