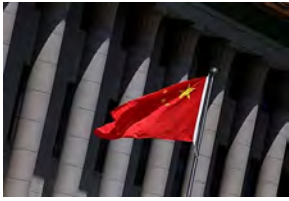


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War on diabetes: An inside look

Big push to get people more physically active



Residents participating in a Bokwa Fitness routine in Choa Chu Kang Park. The lack of physical activity remains a key health issue here as almost 40 per cent of Singaporeans do not get sufficient physical activity, according to the Health Promotion Board. ST FILE PHOTO

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From hawkers to schools, many players have emerged in Singapore's war on diabetes, which was first declared in 2016. This is the third in a series examining the efforts at the front lines of this expansive battle.



Joyce Teo (mailto:joyceteo@sph.com.sg)

In May, Dr Fadzil Hamzah, a sport and exercise medicine practitioner who holds the position of senior staff registrar with the Changi Sports Medicine Centre, was asked to give a talk titled From Dawn To Dusk: Living Healthily In Ramadan.

The unusual thing about this request was that he was not asked to speak at a school or community centre - but at a mosque.

It was held just before a Friday prayer, and conducted "kampung-style", with participants seated on the floor in front of him, said the director of community programmes at Exercise Is Medicine Singapore (Eims), an initiative that aims to make physical activity and exercise a standard part of preventing and treating diseases.

"Of all my years of going to the mosque, I've never come across something like this," Dr Fadzil said of the talk.

It turned out to be the ideal setting, in fact, as the mood was relaxed, the participants were focused and some approached him with questions they had on the topic, after the talk. It was also an example of how the community can be more effectively engaged in communicating the simple but important message of the need to exercise regularly to keep diabetes and other diseases at bay, he said.

Dr Fadzil said many people who are at risk of developing diabetes do not exercise, even when they know it can help to cut their risk.

Burn more calories in an hour

Calories are a measure of how much energy a type of food or drink contains. Factors such as age, levels of physical activity and body size determine the amount of energy one needs. On average, a man needs about 2,600 calories a day while a woman needs about 2,000 calories a day. When you eat and drink more calories than you are burning, you will gain weight. Aerobic activities such as cycling and swimming are the most effective way to burn calories.



Physical activities	Ironing	Hatha yoga	Vacuuming	Walking (casual pace)	Gardening	Weight training	Badminton	Swimming (leisurely)	Jogging	Cycling
Calories burned by a 50kg person in an hour	90	125	165	175	190	250	275	300	350	375
Calories burned by a 65kg person in an hour	117	163	215	228	247	325	358	390	455	488

Source: WORLD CANCER RESEARCH FUND'S EXERCISE CALORIE COUNTER STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

More than this number of Singaporeans live with diabetes, and the figure is projected to rise to one million by 2050.

And many diabetics do not exercise even though they know it helps them control their blood sugar levels better.

Currently, more than 400,000 Singaporeans live with diabetes, and this number is projected to rise to one million by 2050.

The lack of physical activity remains a key health issue here as almost 40 per cent of Singaporeans do not get sufficient physical activity, said a spokesman for the Health Promotion Board (HPB).

There are several reasons that make people reluctant to exercise.

One is the hot and humid weather, which can make outdoor activity seem undesirable.

Perhaps this is why exercise and outdoor activity hardly figure in social gatherings, which tend to revolve around food and relaxation than doing something active, like a walk. Exercise is not part of the social culture here, said Dr Fadzil.

People also tend to look for quick fixes. "The effects of exercise cannot be noticed immediately so many people fail to see it as a long-term investment," he said.

The sport and exercise medicine practitioner said children are more likely to cultivate a habit of being active if their parents themselves exercised regularly and encouraged their offspring to play sports, or work out together as a family.

In school, physical exercise should not be seen as just part of the school curriculum, but could be encouraged as part of play time for children before and after school, said Dr Fadzil.

Indeed, sports psychologist Edgar Tham from SportPsych Consulting said that one is likely to be interested in sporting activities if he has had positive sporting or physical activity experiences as a child.

Pushing to make exercise part of the Singaporean DNA, Dr Fadzil helped to develop the Health Peers training programme that was launched at the start of last year by Changi General Hospital and the South East Community Development Council. It is a programme to train grassroots leaders and volunteers in diabetes prevention and management.

They will help to encourage people to get at least 150 minutes of exercise a week, which works out to half an hour a day, five days a week.

Just this level of exercise can reduce one's risk of getting diabetes as well as help people with diabetes to lower their blood sugar levels, said doctors.

"Many forms of exercise require the use of muscles, and this leads to glucose being transported from the blood into the muscles to be used as fuel," said Dr Benedict Tan, sports medicine chief at Changi General Hospital.

That is not all. "This increased energy consumption continues for hours after the workout, providing an extended period of improved blood sugar profile," he said.

"With regular exercise, the improved blood sugar profile can be sustained throughout the day."

Exercise could help people with diabetes; they may need fewer diabetes medications or less insulin.

It also helps them manage their weight and other chronic medical conditions that they may have, such as hypertension, he said.

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