

Lifewise

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FAMILY DOCTORS

Count on them for your health needs

26

SALT IN FOOD

Less is best

24

ISSUE
95



NHG CARES FOR YOU

A team effort to support you in your well-being journey



Adding years of healthy life

THEY HAVE COMMITTED.



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Stavros Niarchos Foundation
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A HEALTHIER SG WITH NHG CARES

NHG expands its social mission to care for the population with a new strategic business group.



Together with our stakeholders, we can add years of healthy life to our residents and have a healthier population."

MR. JOE HAU, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, NHG CARES SERVICES, NATIONAL HEALTHCARE GROUP



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Dr Mok Boon Rui

PINNACLE FAMILY CLINIC



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The World Association of News Publishers

WAN-IFRA ASIAN MEDIA AWARDS 2022
Best Magazine
Infographics



Lifewise clinched the following awards at APEX 2022:

GRAND AWARD
Magazine, Journals & Tabloids

AWARD OF EXCELLENCE
Magazine, Journals & Tabloids
- Magazine Series

AWARD OF EXCELLENCE
Magazines, Journals & Tabloids
- COVID-19 Media



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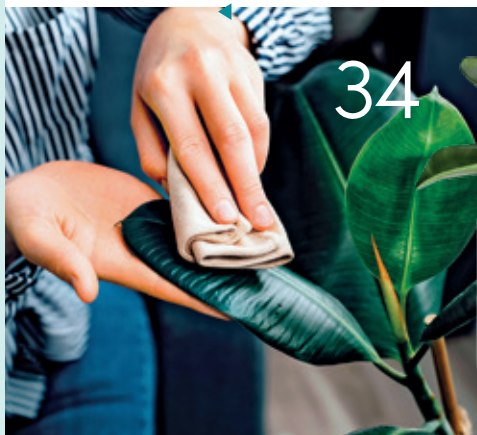
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CARE AT EVERY CORNER

WHEN IT IS TIME TO VISIT A NEIGHBOURHOOD GENERAL PRACTITIONER (GP) CLINIC,

we often go to our preferred physician, the one with whom we have developed a bond over time. And as many would attest, it is a relationship grounded on familiarity, trust, and empathy.

These are some of the attributes of a positive patient-family doctor relationship that the soon-to-be-launched *Healthier SG* initiative will bank on to champion primary and preventive care. On the national level, its aim is to enrol residents with a family doctor, who will see them through the different health stages of their lives — ultimately for a Healthier You, Healthier SG.

As a case in point, *Focus on the Family* (page 26) shines the spotlight on a family physician who runs a clinic in the community. Dr Mok Book Rui, who firmly believes in being “right by their side” as his patients pass different milestones in life, illustrates the benefits of cultivating meaningful rapport with a dedicated family doctor.

Aligned with *Healthier SG*, NHG will also launch its population health movement, NHG Cares, to better serve residents in the Central and North regions of Singapore. Find out how in *Healthier SG With NHG Cares* (page 6).

While *Healthier SG* will reshape our healthcare landscape, the tenets of good health — eating well, staying active, and paying attention to mental well-being — remain true means to keeping well. *Flavour Flings* (page 24) and *Eating to a Plan* (page 32) reiterate the importance of selecting diets and foods that will help in our quest to lead a healthier life. The journey can be daunting if travelled alone; thus, do not hesitate to seek support to keep you going. *Your Partners in Progress* (page 16) offers insight into how NHG health coaches partner residents in the community to provide customised advice and strategies on improving their personal well-being.

The community surrounding you is vital when it comes to ensuring that you do not stray from your journey to good health. Be it your family doctor, health coach, or neighbourhood buddy, having “cheerleaders” to rally us through the ups and downs will help keep us focused on what needs to be done to achieve a healthy and fulfilling life. Be a cheerleader too, to those around you and together, we can do our part to contribute to a *Healthier Singapore*.

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SENIORS' HEALTH REPORT CARD

How have older adults been managing their health? We compare the differences before and during the early period of COVID-19, and suggest ways for improvement. BY JOYCE LIM



THE GOOD AND THE BAD



THE NATIONAL POPULATION HEALTH SURVEY 2021 WAS CONDUCTED AMONG SINGAPORE RESIDENTS AGED 18 TO 74 BETWEEN JULY 2020 AND JUNE 2021. THESE ARE SOME FINDINGS RELATED TO THOSE AGED 60 AND ABOVE:



➤ **MORE SENIORS** went for *pneumococcal and influenza vaccinations*, in addition to COVID-19 jabs.

VACCINATION	2019	2020	2021
> Influenza	24.2%	22.5%↓	32.4%↑
> Pneumococcal disease	10.3%	14.4%↑	22.4%↑



➤ **SENIORS EXERCISED LESS.**

Fewer met the recommended **150 minutes** of moderate-intensity physical activity per week. COVID-19 restrictions might have contributed to this.

EXERCISE	2019	2020	2021
> Adults aged 60 to 74 years who did regular leisure-time exercise	24.2%	22.5%↓	32.4%↑



➤ **SENIORS WERE LESS WILLING**

to seek help for *mental health issues*, although there was a **slight increase** at the height of COVID-19.

SEEKING COUNSELLING	2019	2020	2021
> Adults aged 60 to 74 years who sought help from health professionals	41.2%	47.8%↑	45.8%↓
> Adults aged 60 to 74 years who sought help from informal support networks	59.3%	63.1%↑	50.3%↓



↳ **FEWER SENIORS** went for **health screening**, most likely because non-urgent services were deferred.

HEALTH SCREENING	2019	2020	2021
> Adults aged 60 to 69 years who went for health screening	72.1%	62.9%↓	58.6%↓
> Adults aged 70 to 74 years who went for health screening	79%	66.7%↓	72%↓



↳ **CHRONIC HEALTH CONDITIONS** were **more prevalent** in seniors, but proportion of older adults with some common ailments did not change much.

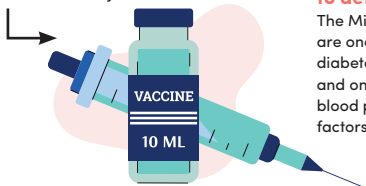
👉 DIABETES >	18.3% OF 60- TO 69-YEAR-OLDS		21.7% OF 70- TO 74-YEAR-OLDS
👉 HIGH BLOOD CHOLESTEROL >	35.8% OF 60- TO 69-YEAR-OLDS		43.4% OF 70- TO 74-YEAR-OLDS
🕒 HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE >	37.8% OF 60- TO 69-YEAR-OLDS		52.7% OF 70- TO 74-YEAR-OLDS

2. FOUR WAYS FOR SENIORS TO STAY HEALTHY



1 Break down the recommended 150 minutes of exercise a week into sessions of 15- to 30-minute intervals. Exercises to try: aerobic (brisk walking, cycling, swimming), strength-training (weights, calisthenics), balance and flexibility (yoga, tai chi, dancing).

2 Vaccinations may not prevent you from getting sick, but they can reduce the risk of severe illness. Three vaccinations to consider: COVID-19 booster (if you have not received it already), and annual flu and pneumococcal jabs.



3 Take charge of your mental and social health. Life-changing events such as retirement or a health scare may trigger anxiety or depression. It helps to confide in a trusted friend, religious leader, or healthcare professional. Maintain social networks and create new routines by picking up a hobby.

4 Go for regular health screenings to detect health issues early. The Ministry of Health's guidelines are once every three years for diabetes and high blood cholesterol, and once every two years for high blood pressure. Other tests depend on factors such as age and family history.

3. MAINTAIN A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR FAMILY DOCTOR

From the **second half of 2023**, residents can enrol with their choice of a General Practitioner (GP) under *Healthier SG*.

Healthier SG focuses on preventive care and strong patient-doctor relationships. Enrolled patients will receive regular follow-ups from their GP to ensure they meet their health plans.

GPs will be integrated into the public healthcare system and supported by services provided by NHG Cares. These include helping residents enrol with GPs, co-developing health packages, and providing diagnostic and medication dispensing services.

NHG Cares is a new movement under the National Healthcare Group (NHG), the healthcare cluster serving the Central and North regions of Singapore.

NHG Cares will be launched in **mid-2023**. Find out more on page 6.

ONLY
3 in 5
Singaporeans have a regular doctor



The launch of *Healthier SG* is just around the corner and NHG's newest movement, NHG Cares, is galvanising the community around it.


A HEALTHIER SG WITH NHG CARES

IN BRIEF



- ▶ To operationalise the national *Healthier SG* strategy, NHG has taken on its expanded mission as NHG Cares to care for the population residing in Central and North Singapore.
- ▶ **NHG Cares will be supported by a new strategic business group — NHG Cares Services.**
- ▶ NHG Cares Services will ramp up support to GPs to integrate them into the larger healthcare system.
- ▶ **NHG Cares Services will work closely with NHG Institutions and community partners in Integrated Care Networks to meet the health and social care needs of residents.**





BY WANDA TAN
IN CONSULTATION WITH
PROFESSOR EUGENE FIDELIS SOH
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CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER // NHG CARES SERVICES
// NATIONAL HEALTHCARE GROUP



ver the past year, Singapore's healthcare sector has been busy behind the scenes as plans for the transformational *Healthier SG* strategy take shape. This long-term, multi-year strategy – unveiled by the Ministry of Health in March 2022 – aims to empower

Singapore residents to become healthier and improve their quality of life through preventive care and strong patient-doctor relationships, supported by the community and the country's three regional healthcare clusters. Now, with *Healthier SG* soon to launch in July 2023, a clearer picture is emerging about the initiative and how it will be implemented.

The National Healthcare Group (NHG) has taken on its expanded mission as NHG Cares to care for the population residing in Central and North Singapore. This means caring for its residents; and not just when they become its patients. In response to *Healthier SG*, NHG is working closely with General Practitioner (GP) clinics and community partners to rethink its care models and reorganise its services. NHG has coalesced existing services and developed new ones into a brand-new strategic business group – NHG Cares Services.

“Our mission is to enable better care and better health for the 1.5 million residents living in the Central and North regions,” says Mr Joe Hau, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of NHG Cares Services. “We will bring together the expertise of primary care and community partners, working alongside our NHG Institutions in this *Healthier SG* journey. Together with our stakeholders, we can add years of healthy life to our residents and have a healthier population.”

ADVOCATING POPULATION HEALTH

No stranger to big changes, NHG has spent the better part of the last decade restructuring to better integrate its network of primary care polyclinics, acute care and tertiary hospitals, as well as national specialty centres, and to deliver more patient-centred care. This has seen the development of Integrated Care Networks (ICNs) that join up care for residents living in Yishun, Woodlands, and Central Singapore. The chief factor driving these changes is Singapore's rapidly-ageing population and the growing age-related chronic disease burden.

In 2022, around one in five citizens was aged 65 and above. This figure is expected to reach one in four by 2030, and to be accompanied by higher prevalence rates of chronic conditions such as diabetes, hyperlipidaemia, and hypertension. At the same time, the proportion of working-age citizens is decreasing, and the senior support ratio will likely fall to as few as 2.4 Singaporeans providing economic support to one elderly



We will bring together the expertise of primary care and community partners, working alongside our NHG Institutions in this *Healthier SG* journey.”

MR JOE HAU, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, NHG CARES SERVICES,
NATIONAL HEALTHCARE GROUP



person by 2030. Thus, as our population ages, not only will the Government have to increase public expenditure on healthcare, but working adults will also be saddled with mounting costs of caring for elderly loved ones — neither of which is sustainable in the long run.

“Today’s healthcare system is no longer fit for purpose as it was built for a relatively young country,” says Professor Eugene Fidelis Soh, Deputy Group CEO (Integrated Care) of NHG. “Our population is ageing and we need to prepare for it. We need to shift healthcare beyond being a safety net to where our goal is to keep residents well and help them age in place. This will lead to a longer-term sustainable model that addresses not just health, but social drivers, and not just cost, but how we invest in the health of our population.”

Prof Soh is essentially describing a population-based approach to redesigning Singapore’s healthcare system to one that empowers people and communities. “We need to move beyond a centre-based care model — where patients are treated at hospitals and clinics — to a place-based model that brings care closer to patients in their communities. This means joining up care with our primary and community partners,” he explains.



Our population is ageing and we need to prepare for it. We need to shift healthcare beyond being a safety net to where our goal is to keep residents well and help them age in place.”

PROFESSOR EUGENE FIDELIS SOH, DEPUTY GROUP CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER (INTEGRATED CARE), NATIONAL HEALTHCARE GROUP, AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL & CENTRAL HEALTH



In fact, he adds, residents should be supported before they even become patients. “We need to pivot from an episodic and transactional care model — which revolves around encounters with illness — to a model that is longitudinal and relationship-based. This will enable us to better

understand the needs and health risks of the population we serve.”

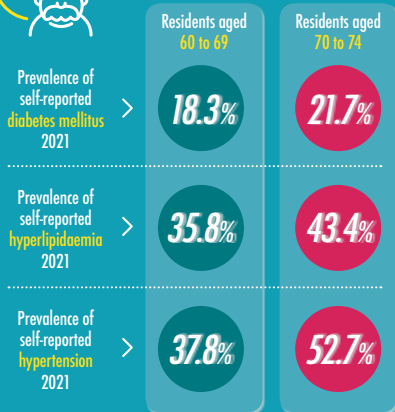
NHG Cares adopts this population health approach to deliver *Healthier SG* to residents living in the Central and North regions. “We are talking about scaling up primary care and preventive health across every neighbourhood, but we cannot do it alone,” Prof Soh points out. “The key to population health is ownership and relationship. Ownership of health rests with the resident, while we build the relationships to support them. NHG Cares is our way of better organising our services to achieve that.”

STRENGTHENING HEALTH ECOSYSTEMS

Under *Healthier SG*, each resident will be invited to enrol with a Family Doctor of his/her choice, be it at a polyclinic or GP clinic. They will co-develop a personalised health plan that includes lifestyle adjustments, regular health



THE AGEING TREND



Proportion of citizens aged 65 and above

11.1%
IN 2012

18.4%
IN 2022

23.8%
IN 2030

Old-age support ratio (number of citizens aged 20 to 64 per citizen aged 65 and above)

5.9
IN 2012

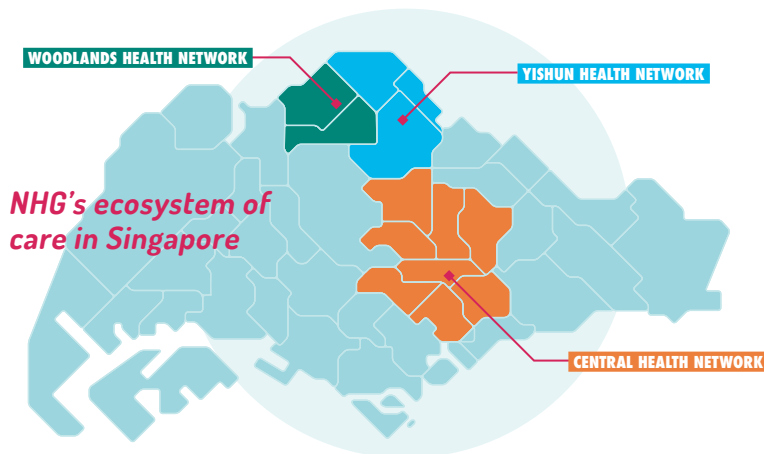
3.3
IN 2022

2.4
IN 2030

Sources: National Population Health Survey 2021; Population in Brief 2022.

screenings, and appropriate vaccinations. Should the resident require additional support, the doctor can recommend activities provided by community partners such as the Health Promotion Board, People's Association (PA), and Sport Singapore; or connect the resident to a social service agency or an active ageing centre near his/her home. Through regular check-ins with a chosen Family Doctor, the resident will thus be able to stay on top of health goals, control or even prevent chronic conditions, and age in place in the community, with his/her doctor by his/her side each step of the way.

NHG Cares plays a key role in this ecosystem of care by integrating health and social care support for residents across all three population zones in the Central, Woodlands, and Yishun. Each zone is served by an ICN and anchored by an NHG hospital: Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) for the Central zone, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) for the Yishun zone, and the future Woodlands Health for the Woodlands zone. "We will provide support to both the Family Doctor and the resident in achieving his or her health plan by joining up care with



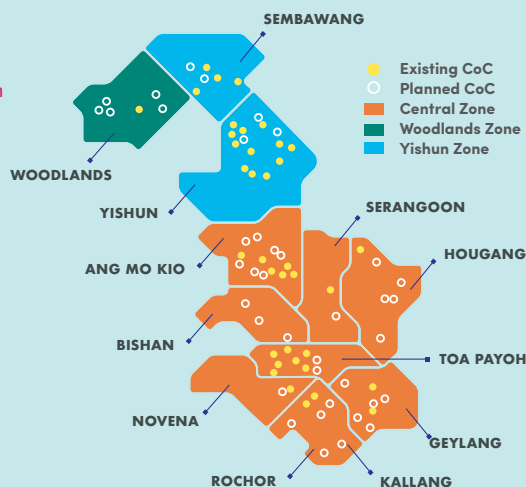
specialists at our hospitals, as well as providing access to community and support services," says Prof Soh, who concurrently serves as CEO of TTSH & Central Health.

To that end, NHG Cares plans to scale up the Community of Care (CoC) initiative piloted by the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), and work closely with primary care providers and community partners to build a CoC in every neighbourhood in Woodlands, Yishun, and Central Singapore. While the three ICNs bring together NHG's strategic partners and larger providers in each zone, a CoC brings together community partners who are serving the local needs at the

neighbourhood level within those zones. "Each CoC will be organised around an anchor community partner, such as an active ageing centre, as well as a Community Health Team comprising community nurses, allied health professionals, and health coaches. They will provide wraparound care for the enrolled resident, who will have the Family Doctor as his or her care navigator," Prof Soh explains. These local area networks will ensure that holistic health and social care is tailored to the needs of the 20,000 to 30,000 residents at the neighbourhood level, and that Family Doctors are ably supported in encouraging

▶ COMMUNITIES OF CARE: A PLACE-BASED CARE MODEL

A network of services, strategic partners, and activated residents, working collaboratively in the neighbourhood to deliver needs-based and place-based care.



OVERVIEW OF ROLLOUT OF CoCs IN CENTRAL AND NORTH REGIONS

residents to lead healthier lifestyles. NHG Cares Services will provide a common backbone of primary care and support services across NHG's CoCs and ICNs.

"Family Doctors should be supported to do more than just refer patients to a hospital specialist," Prof Soh asserts. "We want to dismantle our polyclinic walls and give GPs the same level of support that our polyclinic doctors have. NHG Cares Services will enable us to support our enrolled residents and provide them with a consistent and seamless experience so that they receive the best care possible, whether they see a polyclinic doctor or their neighbourhood GP."

GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Mr Hau's appointment as CEO of NHG Cares Services sees him returning to the NHG Family, where he previously headed TTSH's corporate services division. A healthcare veteran with two decades of industry experience in management, operations, and administration, he most recently served as CEO of Ren Ci Hospital from 2018 to 2022 — which has a suite of intermediate and long-term care facilities including a community hospital, nursing homes, senior care centres, and home care services — before taking on the newly-created position.

"Today, care in the community is still largely fragmented and each organisation tends to work in silos. It is important for us to



MS CHAN SOO CHUNG,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NHG PHARMACY



MS PAULINE GAN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NHG TELEHEALTH AND CALL CENTRE

build strong working relationships among primary care providers, community and social care partners, and NHG Institutions. This will help us gain clarity on our respective roles, so that we can complement one another in reaching out to residents and strengthen our safety net for them," says Mr Hau. "We can help improve coordination among partners, and integrate and enhance care, with better collaboration and support services. It is meaningful and purposeful work."

NHG Cares Services consists of the following entities — some new, some already existing — which will work in unison to advance population health in line with *Healthier SG*.

➤ NHG Primary Care Office

To encourage onboarding of GPs in the Central and North regions to NHG Cares, the Primary Care Office (PCO) coordinates and partners with relationship managers across NHG's ICNs in engaging GPs regularly to understand their needs and strengthen support measures. This is so they are well-placed



MR DAVID HENDRICK JUNIOR,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NHG CARES INSTITUTE

to carry out their duties as care navigators. "Besides co-developing health packages to enrol more residents, PCO will keep GPs apprised of healthcare policies and how best to connect residents to the various community services and programmes in the neighbourhood," says Mr Hau. PCO also works with various stakeholders such as Primary Care Network (PCN) leaders and the agencies to operationalise initiatives to support GPs in the *Healthier SG* journey. One such example is the GP Seminar on 15 April 2023 at the annual POPCollect conference where NHG aims to familiarise GPs in social prescribing to impart

▶ GOING DIGITAL

NHG Cares is leveraging technology to augment the doctor-patient relationship and empower residents through greater health literacy.

▶ An **NHG Cares web portal** will be launched in mid-2023. The website will be the interface for residents and GPs to get information on *Healthier SG*, including national and regional enrolment updates, and membership benefits, as well as directories to community partners' programmes and services.

▶ An **NHG Cares mobile app** will be launched in mid-2023. Residents can access their tailored health goals and progress conveniently, as well as check tips and plans based on their health status. Tracking the programmes and activities that they have participated in and keeping themselves updated on the membership discount deals will be available at their fingertips.



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knowledge on available community resources and how to draw on them, such as knowing who to contact if a resident is interested in joining an exercise group.

PCO also seeks to facilitate shared care services through closer relationships between GPs, polyclinics, and acute care hospitals. This will ensure right-siting of care within the community, as well as smoother referrals in cases where patients have complex needs and require specialist care. IT integration is a key enabler, Mr Hau notes.

➤ NHG Telehealth and Call Centre

Timed to coincide with the start of the national enrolment programme, an omni-channel Telehealth and Call Centre (TCC) will begin operating in July 2023. “Trained call agents will man the NHG Cares hotline and deliver concierge-style customer services — including nursing triage — for residents and GPs,” says Mr Hau. For instance, residents can ring the hotline if they have queries about the enrolment process or community resources, or to get nursing advice for symptom management and



We can help improve coordination among partners, and integrate and enhance care, with better collaboration and support services. It is meaningful and purposeful work.”

MR JOE HAU

health education. Likewise, GPs can speak to a call agent for assistance with care navigation, such as getting recommendations for NHG-run or other community programmes. The call agents will also work 5.5 days a week; there will be a “live” chatbot providing 24/7 support.

The TCC is one of several technology-enabled services (see *Going Digital*) that are being developed to drive NHG Cares’ membership and encourage resident enrolment. Once a

resident enrolls with a Family Doctor who has onboarded to NHG Cares, the resident will be considered an NHG Cares member, which in turn makes him/her eligible for benefits over and above what *Healthier SG* offers (e.g., a free first consultation, as well as subsidised health screenings, vaccinations,

and medications at his/her enrolled clinic). NHG Cares members can enjoy special promotions and discounts at participating merchants, and join wellness programmes that reward them for staying healthy.

➤ NHG Cares Institute

NHG Cares Institute (NCI) aims to be a “digital-first learning hub” that drives the transformation of community care professionals towards integrated health-social care and resident empowerment, says Mr Hau. Plans are currently in the works to curate existing training opportunities under an online portal and commission new ones as needed. NCI will also bring stakeholders together to develop thought leadership in community care and to facilitate exchange in innovative practices.

➤ NHG Allied Health

“NHG Allied Health will decentralise and coordinate the provision of allied health services to optimise the transition of care from hospital to community,” says Mr Hau. It comprises dietitians,

physiotherapists, medical social workers, and other allied health professionals who will embed themselves more deeply in neighbourhoods and join up care with GPs, Community Health Teams, and other partners to help residents maintain their health.

➤ NHG Diagnostics and NHG Pharmacy

Riding on their existing efforts in the primary care and community settings, both NHG Diagnostics and NHG Pharmacy have been integrated with NHG Cares Services to enhance care coordination. “Both divisions will continue to do what they do best in supporting residents and community partners,” says Mr Hau. “Some possible strategic collaborations with GPs include

team-based care in drug information services, medication adherence packaging, medication management review, diagnostic services, and preventive health screening.”

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

To Prof Soh, NHG Cares is more than a business group. In a broader sense, it represents the Group’s overall identity as NHG orientates itself towards caring for its residents and ensuring their population health outcomes.

Prof Soh likens NHG Cares to three important constructs:

1. “NHG Cares brings the **front door** of our health system deeper into the community, with our primary care and community partners,” says Prof Soh. “No longer

are we referring to hospitals and clinics as the front door. Getting residents enrolled with our onboarded GPs allows us to partner them more closely in achieving their health and care goals. The better we know our residents, the better we can treat them.”

“Many people look outwardly healthy but could have conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. I believe many of them will enrol with a family doctor once they find out about the benefits, such as easy access to their health plan on the NHG Cares mobile app.”

Ms Rachel Chua, 41, Ang Mo Kio resident

2. “NHG Cares serves as a **bridge** to help doctors and residents navigate the larger health system and gain access to community and health-social services,” says Prof Soh. He notes there are two bridges that need to be built. The first is between primary and community care, as many GPs have yet to link up with community partners and social service providers in their neighbourhoods. The second is between primary and tertiary care, to accelerate ongoing efforts to improve integrated and seamless care.



▶ A COMMUNITY PARTNER’S PERSPECTIVE

TOUCH Community Services aims to inspire hope in people of all ages and impact their lives positively. This includes the elderly who are among the beneficiaries that TOUCH serves. As Mr James Tan (right), CEO of TOUCH Community Services, shares, the social service agency is ready to play a more active role under NHG Cares’ expanded Community of Care (CoC) framework.

What are your thoughts about Healthier SG?

The work that we do at TOUCH aligns well with *Healthier SG*. As we cope with



an ageing population, TOUCH’s services for the elderly — particularly our active ageing centres (AACs) and home care services — will become more important. TOUCH also subscribes to the principles of reablement, where our staff help seniors in need of rehabilitation and nurse them back to health. We want seniors to get back on their feet and regain some independence, so that they can continue to age in place in their own homes. Ideally, they can then act as community resource persons and motivate their peers to take charge of their own health through good lifestyle habits.

"I have been going to my GP for more than 20 years. She takes good care of me and knows my medical history well. If I need an X-ray or other services, she will refer me to the right providers. I trust her choice."

Mr Lewis Lee, 52, Yishun resident

3. "NHG Cares extends our **shared services** across the Central and North regions. It levels up the support given to our GP partners, just like what we offer at our polyclinics," says Prof Soh. This enables family doctors to provide more holistic care to residents by tapping on the call centre, digital applications, and clinical support services such as diagnosticians, pharmacists, and allied health professionals. These shared services are now better organised as NHG Cares Services.

"My family doctor knows all about my medical conditions including diabetes, for which I have regular follow-up at Ang Mo Kio Specialist Centre. I also had a total knee replacement at Tan Tock Seng Hospital last month and now attend physiotherapy sessions at a day rehabilitation centre near my home. I am recovering well in my neighbourhood."

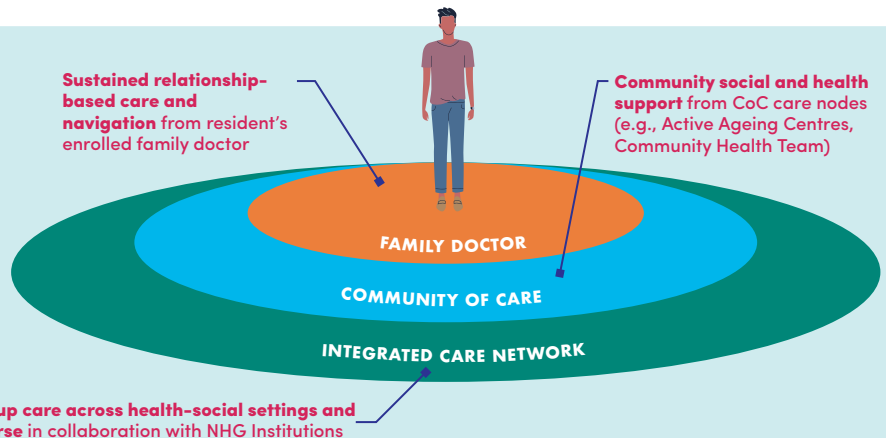
Mdm Wong Foong Lian, 81, Bishan resident

"We are only at the start of the population health journey," Prof Soh affirms. "Enrolment of elderly residents is the first step come July 2023. Our immediate focus is on creating place-based models for the elderly, anchored by active ageing centres and supported by a CoC in every neighbourhood. In time, we will leverage digital health for younger residents and



extend health programmes into schools and workplaces. This is our approach towards Health for All." It will take time, but by strengthening local care in every neighbourhood and making healthcare more resident-centric, we will one day see a *Healthier SG*. **LW**

Enrolled residents are supported by their **family doctor** and the network of partners in their surrounding **Community of Care**, working together with NHG Institutions for joined-up care as part of an **Integrated Care Network**.



Can you highlight a few CoC initiatives that TOUCH is involved in?

An example would be the Ang Mo Kio Partners' Network, which we co-founded with Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre Community Services, Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital, Asian Women's Welfare Association, NHG, and Dementia Singapore. Last year, we collaborated on building an inclusive and dementia-friendly community. Together, we have developed a resource guide to equip the community with the know-how to help persons living with dementia and their families. At our AACs, nurses

from KTPH and TTSH run Community Health Posts for health monitoring and screening of individuals with chronic conditions or those medically at risk. TOUCH also tapped on the WeCare Arts Fund, set up by the National Arts Council and PA, for our AACs' art programme. Engaging seniors in art has enhanced their mental wellness and social connectedness.

What excites you the most about NHG Cares?

It presents opportunities for deeper collaboration between NHG, us, and our partners. For example, the TCC will be

the first point of contact for residents who need help, such as how to get ComCare cash assistance, how to access home care services, or where the nearest AAC is from their home. The hotline could serve as the broker between AACs and GPs, as well as other community partners. Through the NHG Cares Institute, the community health workforce – including TOUCH's therapists, nurses, and volunteers – can upskill themselves through training courses. I also see NHG Cares playing a coordinating role among the various social service agencies to optimise resource utilisation.

DON'T HOLD BACK

You had a two-week deadline to put together a PowerPoint presentation, but you kept putting the work off until the day before it was due. You have had slight chest pains for days now, and know you should see a doctor, yet you keep putting that off, too.

In other words, you have been procrastinating — the act of pushing back a task that usually seems unpleasant or overwhelming but is important and really needs to be done. Sometimes, a person will shift his/her focus to something else that is easier or more enjoyable — and often not urgent or even necessary.

Procrastinating is a common part of human behaviour (we have all done it), but it is also often seen as a character flaw associated with poor time management or laziness. But stigmatising procrastination hardly gets to the root of the problem. Studies suggest that this trait may be an emotional dysregulation problem. In other words, we procrastinate to avoid the fear, despair, or boredom that a certain task is perceived to induce.

The fact is that habitual procrastinators may not know how to deal with the discomfort brought on by unpleasant feelings from needing to complete a task. This discomfort can drive them to choose task avoidance instead, and over time, doing so can lead to poor tolerance for distress — the inability to manage actual or perceived emotional distress.

Understanding the psychology behind why we keep putting things off can empower us to overcome the

Negative feelings may be counterproductive. Instead, demonstrate self-compassion for your past procrastinating behaviour.



Why do we keep putting off an important task? What can we do to stop habitual procrastinating?

emotional barriers that hold us back — and start getting stuff done.

STUCK IN OUR HEAD

Most of us procrastinate every now and then, but studies show that around 20 per cent of adults worldwide are chronic procrastinators. One reason for this is that procrastination is a vicious cycle. “When you put off doing a task to avoid unpleasant feelings, over time, you will develop the urge to avoid these feelings whenever discomfort arises. Subsequently, you may engage in another low-priority task and come up with excuses to justify that procrastinating is okay,” explains Ms Valerie Wang, Senior Psychologist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Procrastination usually has its roots in the unhelpful rules and assumptions we may have about ourselves and/or how the world works. These then generate negative emotions. For example, we may fear failure because we think others will mock us, or we may

fear rising to a challenge because of the perceived unpredictability and lack of control over the situation.

When we have to perform a task that induces such negative emotions, a battle occurs inside our heads. The part of our brain responsible for self-regulation and logical analysis tells us that we should complete the task, while the part of our brain responsible for motivation and emotion tells us to avoid it because of the negative feelings that come with it.

“The latter often prevails because our brain tends to prefer instant gratification despite knowing that it will only provide temporary relief from the unpleasant feelings,” says Ms Wang.

The result? Many of us end up procrastinating. Ironically, procrastinating just makes us feel worse. “People often feel bad about procrastinating because they are reminded that they have not

BY ANNIE TAN

**IN CONSULTATION WITH
MS VALERIE WANG
SENIOR PSYCHOLOGIST //
TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL.**



completed what they ought to do," says Ms Wang.

"Eventually, they face the consequences of not completing the task or rushing to complete it at the last minute," she adds. These 'bad feelings' also maintain the cycle of procrastination — you start to feel guilt, which can cause you to 'shut down,' leading to more procrastinating.

COUNTING THE COST

Procrastination can sneak into various aspects of life — from studies to work, and household chores to health check-ups, in our relationships and decision-making. Over time, avoiding tasks and its associated stress can have a detrimental impact on our physical, social, and mental well-being.

"People who often procrastinate tend to feel more stress from putting off important tasks. On the other hand, high-stress levels are associated with an increased risk of serious and chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity," says Ms Wang.

In addition, habitual failure to meet work deadlines, keep social commitments, or fulfil promises to our partner can affect the quality of interpersonal relationships and cause chronic stress. These might leave us with low mood and dissatisfaction with life, and negatively affect our health and mental well-being, cautions Ms Wang.

CULTIVATE SELF-AWARENESS

Breaking the cycle starts with being kind to yourself. The important thing is not to 'beat yourself up' as "excessive guilt and self-blame will not help you to overcome procrastination," says Ms Wang. In many cases, such negative feelings may be counterproductive.

WHEN KIDS APPEAR TO PROCRASTINATE

► Does dawdling over homework or the inability to finish a chore indicate a child will become a procrastinating adult? Not so. Sometimes the inability to complete a task may be the result of various factors, such as not understanding what is expected or having trouble with managing time, notes Ms Wang. While such behaviour may be mistaken for procrastination, the root cause is entirely different. Adults can help these children address such behaviours by looking for possible learning deficits or setting clearer expectations.



"Instead, demonstrate self-compassion for your past procrastinating behaviour and focus on what you can do in the present to start doing things," she suggests.

The most important step is to be aware of your tendency to engage in certain pleasurable and lower-priority tasks over important ones. With this self-awareness, you can focus on overcoming procrastinating tendencies.

Those unsure of the cause of their procrastination or how best to address it would benefit from professional help. Psychologists can help individuals gain insight into the underlying emotions that drive such behaviour. "Through therapy, you can learn to challenge unhelpful rules and assumptions, better regulate unpleasant emotions, tolerate distress, and find meaning in being a 'doer,'" says Ms Wang. **LW**

6 STRATEGIES TO STOP PROCRASTINATING

1. PRIORITISE:

- Write down a 'To Do' list and rank tasks in order of importance or urgency.

2. DIVIDE AND CONQUER:

- Break down tasks into smaller and more manageable steps. Allocate the time required for each step and decide which steps to start with first.

3. WORST FIRST OR BEST FIRST:

- Start with the most dreaded task and get it over and done with, or start with a task that energises and creates momentum.

4. SET A TIMER:

- Spend 10 minutes on a task and see if you can spend another 10 minutes on it.

5. PRIME TIME AND PLACE:

- Choose the right time of the day and create a conducive environment with minimal distractions to complete your task.

6. PLAN REWARDS:

- Reward yourself after you have completed a task by engaging in a preferred activity.



BY KEENAN PEREIRA



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MS YEO LOO SEE
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NATIONAL HEALTHCARE
GROUP POLYCLINICS

YOUR PARTNERS IN PROGRESS

Navigating cyberspace for health advice can be overwhelming, as Madam Usha Venkatramaiah can attest. The

59-year-old retiree is constantly researching online on how she can eat, move, and live better, but finds the process perplexing. "There is so much information out there. These are not always consistent and vary from source to source," she says.

"I have diabetes, and advice on the type of breakfast to start my day with is confusing. Some sources say to avoid carbohydrates while others say complex carbohydrates are fine. Without clear guidance, I feel quite helpless." Mdm Usha also finds it a challenge to adapt to new, healthier habits. "Sometimes, I fall back into my old habits because I just lose motivation."

Fortunately, Mdm Usha — and any of us wanting to adopt healthier habits — can draw on the expertise and moral support of health or care coaches.

Determined to keep fit? A helping hand from health and care coaches can make a difference.

"A health coach is your friend in the community. We genuinely want to establish relationships with residents by knowing more about their lifestyles," says Mr Chua Ming Yen, a Health Coach with Woodlands Health (WH). Once a health coach understands enough about an individual, he/she can then draw up a personalised care plan with advice on what to eat, how to exercise, how to manage chronic health conditions, and who to approach in the community if more specialised care is needed. "We empower anyone on a health journey to live healthier," says Mr Chua.

Each session with a health coach lasts on average 20 minutes and is conducted at a Community Health Post (CHP). The posts are dotted around Singapore at Residents' Networks, community clubs, and active ageing centres. Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) CHPs are staffed by a team of health coaches, nurses, allied health professionals, and

doctors. For WH, the multidisciplinary team comprises health coaches, care coordinators, and community nurses.

This network is important as health coaches would not be able to carry out their work if they function in isolation. They can also turn to their team members for support. For example, community nurses will perform case management for those requiring more complex care in managing chronic diseases, while care coordinators work with social agencies or partners to address issues such as mental or financial stress.

Any Singaporean can gain access to the services of a health coach regardless of their present state of health — and for free, too. "We welcome everybody to join us and plan their health journey and goals together with us," says Mr Chua. "We recommend that those with underlying



chronic diseases visit us once a week, while those without any ailments can see us once a month.”

TRAINED TO HELP

Health coaches are trained in chronic disease management, nutrition, and physical health, explains Ms Carina Wong, Health Coach at TTSH. Each coach is also required to have a degree in psychology, social sciences or counselling.

These qualifications ensure that coaches possess the knowledge and skills necessary to help patients make a lasting change. Ms Yeo Loo See, Deputy Director of Nursing Services at the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP), says care coaches with such qualifications can help patients with chronic conditions achieve their health goals. “Care coaches are trained in communication skills for patient empowerment and motivation,” she explains. These skills come in handy in persuading patients to form better lifestyle habits.

Counselling skills are useful when it comes to serving residents who find adopting new habits daunting. In such situations, health coaches turn to motivational interviewing — a counselling method that encourages positive behavioural changes. Other tactics, such as the Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound (SMART) goal framework are also adopted. The SMART method gives people a sense of direction and motivates them to reach a goal.

HOW HEALTH COACHING WORKS

For example, a resident with less-than-desirable diabetes control is referred to a health coach. Early consultations will revolve around getting insights into the patient’s current lifestyle.

“After such conversations, the health coach can suss out what matters to the resident, and ascertain his/her readiness to change their lifestyle,” says



Ms Wong. Once these parameters have been established, a health goal will be agreed on, with the coach recommending manageable lifestyle tweaks. Such dialogue ensures residents can respond to suggestions promptly and can highlight areas they may find challenging or require help with. This is what makes health coaching more effective than just handing out reading materials.

At NHGP, care coaches are pegged to patients who are enrolled in NHGP’s programmes — RELATE (RElationship-based HeALTH and Social iNtegration) and PACt (Patient Activation through Conversations).

Care coaches at NHGP are trained with communication skills to motivate and empower patients. Their unique skill sets allow them to complement the multidisciplinary care at the polyclinics. “The trusting relationship between the patient and care coach is the key to success for achieving their health goals. Patients need to be ready and willing to

work with the care coach to improve their health,” says Dr Sabrina Wong, Deputy Director of Clinical Services at NHGP.

Studies have shown that health coaching has made a positive impact in improving the health of its recipients. “A systematic review of 22 studies, published in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* found that health coaching of residents with Type 2 diabetes significantly improved their sugar control,” Dr Wong adds. **LW**



KEYS TO SUCCESS

Rapport and a relationship built on trust are just two factors that make health coaching successful. “It helps when residents see that health coaches are sincerely concerned for their well-being and health,” says Ms Wong. To this end, coaches need to demonstrate traits like active listening, curiosity, maintaining eye contact, and adopting positive body language, which all help build rapport.

“Patients should feel comfortable communicating with the care coach as two-way communication is important,” says Ms Yeo. Patients, too, should approach sessions with an open mind and be willing to work on improving their well-being. “They need to have a positive, learning, and goal-setting mindset,” she adds.

These are traits that Mdm Usha plans to adopt as she prepares for her first health coaching session this year. “Hopefully, this will enable me to enter my 60s in better health,” she says.

> Scan the QR codes to find your nearest Community Health Post:



Woodlands Health



Tan Tock Seng Hospital

> Residents can sign up for a TTSH health programme here:



ONE TAB TOO MANY

Exercise care when taking health supplements.



BY JOYCE LIM

IN CONSULTATION WITH
MS PRATIBHA NAIR
SENIOR PHARMACIST //
WOODLANDS POLYCLINIC



TAKE HEED OF
THE WARNING
SIGNS



Health supplements are popular with local consumers as they are seen to be an easy way to plug nutritional gaps. Many people lead busy lifestyles which leave little time for a balanced diet, exercise, or adequate rest. Or they may want to give their workouts or mental performance an extra boost, which is something that supplements often claim to be able to provide.

From the standpoint of most nutritionists, we should be able to get the nutrients we need from a balanced and varied diet. Ms Pratibha Nair, Senior Pharmacist at Woodlands Polyclinic, says that our bodies only require a small amount of vitamins and minerals every day, and the recommended dietary allowances (RDA) can usually be met through a healthy diet.

However, in reality, many people may not meet the RDA of vitamins and minerals for their age and gender group for various reasons. Eating out at hawker centres, skipping meals, or relying on fast foods may result in not eating enough of the right foods or lead to fluctuations in nutrient intake. Would a daily supplement then be able to make up for the lack in vitamins and minerals in such scenarios?

Popping a multivitamin on its own may not have the same effect on your body compared to ingesting vitamins in the form of whole foods. "Whole foods contain a complex composition of vitamins, minerals, fibre, and plant chemicals, which all work together," says Ms Nair. "A healthy and balanced diet has also been linked to a lower risk of developing long-term medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes. But this link is not seen when taking vitamin and mineral supplements alone. Instead of taking supplements as a 'quick fix' or 'buffer', it is advisable to build healthy eating habits to get the nutrients a person needs, as this may provide health benefits in the future as well."

In Singapore, health supplements do not require approvals and are not evaluated by the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) before they can be sold locally. They are also not assessed for effectiveness. Hence, if a supplement makes any claims that it is "HSA-approved", it should trigger warning bells.

HSA does monitor products on the market to make sure that they do not contain harmful ingredients, and issues product recalls when necessary. But the onus is on consumers to be discerning and do their research. In particular, beware of dubious claims made by the manufacturer on the packaging or on their websites.

Be careful of products that promise "quick cures" or "easy solutions" to problems. To achieve fast results, some dealers may produce and sell supplements with undeclared, potent medicinal ingredients.

► If you suspect that the health supplement that you are taking has caused an unwanted side effect, see a doctor or pharmacist immediately. Contact HSA to report health supplements with misleading claims at 68663485 or via email at hsa_is@hsa.gov.sg.



DO YOU REALLY NEED A SUPPLEMENT?

That said, some people do benefit from taking specific types of oral supplements. In certain cases, supplements can correct a potential or true lack of a specific vitamin or mineral.

> Pregnancy

Women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant are recommended to take a daily prenatal vitamin and mineral supplement in addition to having a healthy and balanced diet. This helps to meet the increased need of folic acid, iron, iodine, and vitamin D during pregnancy.

> Medical conditions

Those who do not have sufficient levels of a specific vitamin or mineral may benefit from supplementation on top of changing his/her diet. People diagnosed with anaemia, a condition where the body does not produce enough red blood cells, lack iron. It may cause symptoms such as shortness of breath, tiredness, lack of energy, and an inability to focus. Pregnant women, women with heavy menstrual periods, and people with chronic kidney disease are at risk of iron-deficiency anaemia. They will benefit from taking foods

high in iron, and may also find that taking iron supplements can help to improve their symptoms.

People who have osteoporosis, or who have a higher risk of osteoporosis, may be required to take calcium supplements (with or without Vitamin D) as well as eat more foods high in calcium. This can help them maintain strong bones and reduce the risk of fractures. Glucosamine supplements – with or without chondroitin and methylsulfonylmethane (MSM) – may also alleviate knee pain in people with osteoarthritis, by reducing the friction between the joints and making the cartilage stronger. However, the effectiveness of glucosamine on reducing knee pain differs from person to person.

> Special diets

Vegetarians and vegans who do not eat any meat may require vitamin B12 supplementation as most sources of vitamin B12 come from animals.

> Major surgery

People who are recovering from a major surgery are usually given nutritional advice to help heal wounds, build the immune system to prevent infections, and improve energy levels. Recommended foods would usually be high in vitamin C, calcium, and protein. Supplements can help to boost their intake of these.



Taking high doses of any vitamin, or multiple types of supplements may increase the risk of harm instead of providing benefits for you.

CAN YOU OVERDOSE ON SUPPLEMENTS?

Taking high doses of any vitamin, or multiple types of supplements may increase the risk of harm instead of providing benefits for you, warns Ms Nair.

If you have the habit of taking several different types of supplements, you might unknowingly exceed the RDA of certain nutrients. This is because the supplements may contain similar ingredients. Taking more than the maximum recommended amount can increase the risk of developing side effects. For example, taking too much iron can cause nausea and vomiting, and may damage the liver. Similarly, taking too much calcium may be related to health problems such as constipation, and heart and kidney function problems, such as an increased risk of kidney stones.



FOUR THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT TAKING SUPPLEMENTS

1. Is it all right to switch brands? Or should you continue to take the same brand to see results?

There are no specific brand recommendations for health supplements. You may compare the ingredients between the different brands of supplements to verify if the active ingredient between the brands is the same. The choice of brand is based on the features specific to the product, cost, and your personal preferences.

2. How long does it take to see results or reap the benefits of a supplement?

If you have enough nutrients in your diet, you may not see any benefits of taking vitamin or mineral supplements. If you are taking these supplements for a deficiency, you may see the benefits over a period of four to 12 weeks, depending on the extent of the deficiency. Your doctor would discuss with you how to monitor the effects of taking the supplement, and review your treatment accordingly.

3. Is it dangerous to take expired supplements?

The "use by" date or the expiration date on a supplement label advises how long a supplement is expected to last before the full efficacy and safety reduces. This is usually recommended by the manufacturer to guarantee that the supplement is of the best quality up to this date. Therefore, it is not advisable to consume supplements beyond the recommended expiry date.

4. Do supplements go bad?

Exposure to heat and/or moisture may damage or reduce the effectiveness of supplements. Store them in a cool, dry place, away from sunlight. Follow the storage instructions on the label, such as if there is any need to refrigerate after opening.

CAPSULE BOOSTERS

Also, people who are on medications, especially over the long-term, need to be more careful before starting any new supplements as some of these may interact with their medications, as well as other supplements.

As a general rule, if you have any medical conditions or are on long-term medications, always check with your doctor and pharmacist if a supplement is safe or useful for you, as well as the suitable dosage, advises Ms Nair. There is usually little risk in developing side effects as long as supplements are obtained from legitimate and established sources, and are taken at the recommended doses as directed on the product label.

Supplements that pose a danger are those which are adulterated with potent substances. Ms Nair cites two cases in Singapore. In 2019, a woman in her 50s purchased a weight-loss supplement called BB Body from an online seller based in Malaysia via social media. The product contained a banned substance. After consuming it for about three months, she developed an extremely fast heart rate. This eventually caused



People who are healthy in general need not take any supplements."

a sudden loss of consciousness, and she had to be resuscitated. Although she survived, she had to get a heart defibrillator implant to regulate her heartbeat and required long-term medication. The second case was not as lucky. In 2012, a 24-year-old woman who consumed weight-loss capsules bought online from an overseas seller suffered from chest pains and passed away due to dinitrophenol poisoning.

Dinitrophenol, a drug that causes rapid weight loss, has adverse effects such as liver toxicity, and is banned for sale in Singapore.

Ms Nair recommends getting your health supplements from reputable sources such as a pharmacy or an established retail store. "Stay away from dubious sellers on the Internet and sources that you may not be able to hold accountable for any product defects — even if a product is recommended to you by a close friend or relative. Be careful about results that sound too good to be true," she advises.

"People who are healthy in general need not take any supplements," reiterates Ms Nair. **LW**

WHAT TO TAKE NOTE OF ON A SUPPLEMENT LABEL

▶ DIRECTIONS FOR CONSUMPTION

- ✓ Includes instructions on how much and how often the product should be taken.
- ✓ It is generally safe to take the product as instructed on the product label for over-the-counter supplements.

▶ DETAILS ON PRODUCT QUALITY

- ✓ Some products will indicate that the quality of the product has been assessed by a third party to meet good manufacturing practices (GMP). Examples of third-party testing organisations include United States Pharmacopeia (USP) and ConsumerLab.

▶ COMMON TERMS USED

- ✓ "Natural" products claim to not have any artificial ingredients, including flavouring or colouring.
- ✓ "Organic" products contain vitamins, minerals, or herbs from organic plants or animals.
- ✓ "Food-based" products are usually made from a concentrated mix of foods that is then dehydrated.
- ✓ "Herbal" products contain one or more herbs as the active ingredient(s).

▶ NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF THE PRODUCT

- ✓ Usually listed as the percentage of nutrient required by the average person per day.
- ✓ It is important not to exceed the daily allowance of each nutrient to prevent side effects.

▶ INGREDIENTS IN THE PRODUCT

- ✓ Usually listed based on the quantity present (from the highest quantity per serving to the lowest).
- ✓ The ingredient list may include additives, herbs, and/or preservatives.

▶ DETAILS ON FOOD ALLERGENS AND SUITABILITY

- ✓ For people with special diets (for example, vegetarians or vegans).

▶ EXPIRY DATE AND STORAGE INSTRUCTIONS

- ✓ For optimal potency, consume before the supplement expires and follow the storage instructions.



OLD MAN'S FRIEND

BY EVELINE GAN

IN CONSULTATION WITH
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ASSOCIATE CONSULTANT //
DEPARTMENT OF RESPIRATORY
AND CRITICAL CARE MEDICINE
// TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL



CLEARING THE AIR ABOUT PNEUMONIA

Almost one in five deaths in Singapore is due to this serious medical condition. Learn how you can reduce the risk of getting it.

Going about our daily lives, we give scant thought as to how — every time we take a breath — air enters the air sacs called alveoli in our lungs, and how these millions of tiny spaces facilitate gas exchange, allowing oxygen into the bloodstream and removing carbon dioxide.

Breathing to us is simply second nature, and a process that we take for granted — until something goes awry. Like contracting pneumonia for instance. Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs that affects the alveoli, disrupts their life-sustaining work, and makes it hard for us to breathe.

Responsible for about 18 per cent of deaths in 2021, pneumonia is the third-leading cause of death in Singapore, after cancer and Ischaemic heart diseases (heart problems caused by narrowed heart arteries). It is also one of the top reasons for admission to hospital.

Pneumonia can be deadly because it affects a person's airway and breathing. Dr Sharlene Ho,

Associate Consultant at the Department of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, says, "airway and breathing are the first two things in the ABCs of resuscitation (Airway, Breathing and Circulation), which are vital for life." That means if you get pneumonia, your health can deteriorate rapidly.

For Mr Ronald Rajan, an unnerving symptom he experienced during his recent bout of pneumonia was extreme fatigue. He also had violent coughing fits that left him feeling as if he had been hit by an "electric current". "I could only get up for a few minutes at a time, then I'd have to lie down again," recalls the 48-year-old editor. He has since recovered, but the fatigue lingered for about a fortnight after recovery.

WREAKING HAVOC ON THE BODY

Pneumonia strikes when respiratory pathogens such as viruses, bacteria, and (less commonly) fungi are inhaled into the body. These replicate



themselves in the alveoli and cause the lungs to become inflamed and filled with pus, mucus, and fluid. This reaction hinders the normal process of gas exchange and can cause low oxygen levels. When this 'malfunction' occurs, the body's immune system is triggered to produce inflammatory mediators (chemicals that act on blood vessels and cells) and antibodies to fight the infection.

In many instances, our immune system is able to clear the infection. But sometimes, it is not that straightforward. Dr Ho explains that the immune systems of some people can become "dysregulated [or in some instances also impaired], causing widespread inflammation". This is when the body's own tissues are damaged and multi-organ dysfunction can result.

At this stage, pneumonia becomes life-threatening. Besides the lungs, many organs in the body can be affected. For example, the patient's blood pressure can drop to a dangerously low level (septic shock), the kidneys may fail, and he/she can become drowsy or confused.

THOSE MOST AT RISK

As it affects mostly seniors — particularly those above 65 years — the infection is often colloquially

referred to as "old man's friend". "A major reason why pneumonia is so common in Singapore is our rapidly-ageing population.

"As our population ages, we will continue to see pneumonia as the final event that ends the lives of many older people," says Dr Ho. That said, pneumonia can also impact younger people of other ages, including children.

Older people are at high risk because their immune system might be weak and — more often than not — they have multiple underlying medical conditions. They tend to experience atypical symptoms; they might feel lethargic or confused, have a slight cough, and low-grade fever. Some may not even have a fever. "Thus, pneumonia in older adults may not be recognised until it has progressed to a

severe state when life-threatening complications set in," says Dr Ho.

In Mr Rajan's case, it started as high fever of around 39 degrees Celsius. When the temperature subsided a few days later, he thought it was just a "normal flu". He found out that it was pneumonia when the fever returned and he consulted a doctor. Mr Rajan was put on two types of antibiotics for a week and recovered without having to be admitted to the hospital.

Age aside, other factors contribute to a person's vulnerability to pneumonia. These factors include medical conditions such as chronic lung disease, chronic heart disease, and diabetes, smoking, and a weak immune system.

A type of pneumonia known as aspiration pneumonia can occur



PNEUMONIA

→ Affects **air sacs** in the lungs (alveoli).

→ Commonly caused by **bacteria**. Viruses and fungus can also cause pneumonia.

→ **Symptoms** include cough, fever, sharp pain in the chest with breathing or coughing, chills, fatigue, and loss of appetite.



BRONCHITIS

VS

→ Affects **linings** of large airways in the lungs (bronchi).

→ Caused by **virus** and **smoking**.

→ **Symptoms** include cough, wheezing, mild breathlessness, and respiratory tract infection.





Pneumonia in older adults may not be recognised until it has progressed to a severe state when life-threatening complications set in.”

when food or water that a person consumes goes into the lungs instead of the food pipe (oesophagus). This condition tends to affect people who have swallowing impairment, for example, stroke patients with weakened muscles of swallowing, patients with abnormalities in the oesophagus which obstruct the food passage, or people who are in a state of altered consciousness as a result of a seizure, or drug or alcohol use.

THE ROOTS OF PNEUMONIA

Streptococcus pneumoniae is the most common bacterial cause of pneumonia that occurs within a community, outside of a hospital setting. *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* mostly infects young adults and is termed “walking pneumonia” as symptoms tend to be milder. Other bacteria include *Haemophilus influenzae*, *Moraxella catarrhalis*, and *Staphylococcus aureus*. Viruses that commonly cause upper respiratory tract infections, such as influenza and COVID-19, can cause pneumonia as well.

You can also develop the condition after breathing in the spores of certain fungi; however, this is less common. Dr Ho notes this is mostly seen in patients who already have a compromised immune system, for example, those with untreated human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, or are on immunosuppressive drugs.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Common symptoms of pneumonia include cough (with or without sputum), breathlessness, fever, and a sharp pain in the chest when coughing. Some patients may also experience chills, fatigue, and loss of appetite.

As such symptoms are not specific to pneumonia, the latter can sometimes be mistaken for another common respiratory infection — bronchitis. This condition affects the lining of the large airways in the lungs (bronchi) but not the alveoli. Acute bronchitis is caused by viruses in nine out of 10 cases, while chronic bronchitis is mainly caused by cigarette smoking.

Like pneumonia, cough is the main symptom in acute bronchitis. Wheezing and mild breathlessness may accompany the cough. Many patients also have upper respiratory tract infection, such as runny nose and sore throat, preceding bronchitis. However, fever, chills, and fatigue are rare.

Dr Ho explains that bronchitis rarely leads to pneumonia, “The infection seldom extends beyond the bronchi to involve the alveoli. However, it can occur in cases of bacterial superinfection or viral pneumonias, and people who are at risk of these complications often have a compromised immune system.”

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

A pneumonia diagnosis is made based on symptoms as well as a chest X-ray. What happens after that depends on how sick the patient is and the level of care needed.

“As the pathogen (causing the pneumonia) is often unknown at the time of diagnosis, antibiotic treatment is started empirically to treat for bacterial infection, targeting the most likely pathogen,” says Dr Ho.

For patients with severe cases and need to be admitted to the hospital, additional tests, such as sputum, nasal/throat swab, and blood tests, are carried out to determine the cause of the infection.

If pneumonia is left untreated, complications may develop when the infection spreads into, say, the bloodstream. Other complications include pus-filled cavity in the lungs (lung abscess) and collection of pus in the cavity between the lung and

the membrane that surrounds it, i.e., pleural space (empyema).

Dr Ho recommends the following ways to reduce the risk of getting pneumonia:

> **Stop smoking.** The habit is a well-known risk factor for pneumonia.

> **Get vaccinated.** Adults above 65 are advised to have their influenza (annually) and pneumococcal (two doses) vaccinations. As recommended on the National Adult Immunisation Schedule, younger adults with specific medical conditions, such as chronic lung, heart, liver, or kidney disease, diabetes mellitus, haematological disorders, or immunocompromised conditions, are also advised to take the two vaccinations.

> **Practise good personal hygiene.** This includes frequent hand washing with soap, wearing a mask when having respiratory symptoms, and avoiding close contact with people who are unwell or have respiratory symptoms. **LW**



▶ WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE PNEUMONIA

- ▶ See your family doctor to get an early diagnosis and treatment.
- ▶ Complete the full course of antibiotic treatment prescribed by your doctor.
- ▶ Rest at home until you are well.
- ▶ Practise good hygiene to protect others. For example, wash your hands frequently, wear a surgical mask when feeling unwell, and sneeze/cough into a tissue.

Source: HealthHub



TASTE TEST

SCAN QR CODE



▶ to watch the Ministry of Health's The Great A-Salt video.



FLAVOUR

TOO MUCH SALT

THE 2018/2019 NATIONAL NUTRITION SURVEY FINDINGS: SINGAPOREANS ARE INGESTING WELL ABOVE THE RECOMMENDED AMOUNT OF SALT IN THEIR DAILY DIETS.

Sodium chloride gives food an undisputed kick, but less is best when it comes to its use.

FLINGINGS



BY TINA WANG

IN CONSULTATION WITH
MS CHAN SAU LING
SENIOR DIETITIAN // NATIONAL
HEALTHCARE GROUP POLYCLINICS

A small amount of sodium is essential to keep our nerves and muscles working properly, as well as maintain our body's fluid balance. A healthy adult needs no more than 2,000mg of sodium — the equivalent of what is found in less than one teaspoon (5g) of salt — a day. Singaporeans, however, are ingesting well above that amount in their daily diets. The 2018/2019 National Nutrition Survey findings — conducted by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) — found that we consume a whopping 3,600mg of sodium per day — 1.8 times more of what we really need.

We are not alone in our over-consumption; World Health Organization figures state that most people consume around twice the recommended maximum level of intake.

"Table salt" and "sodium" are terms often used interchangeably but they are in fact not the same. Salt is an ionic compound called sodium chloride. 100g of salt (sodium chloride) contains 40g sodium and 60g chloride. Sodium is a mineral found at very low levels in foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts.

Processed foods, such as meats (including bacon, ham, and sausage), cheese, frozen meals, fast foods, seasoning, and condiments contain a lot of sodium. Examples of hawker fare with high amounts of sodium include seafood *tom yam ban mian*, Penang

laksa, chicken curry noodles, and braised duck rice. Excess sodium is linked to adverse health outcomes.

MAKING SMARTER CHOICES

How can you tell if you are overloading on sodium? Immediate symptoms include feeling bloated or puffy, and the swelling of hands and feet (consuming too much sodium can make the body retain water).

Additionally, the feeling of thirst accompanied by a dry mouth effect is a sure-signal from your body to drink more water in order to correct the sodium-to-water ratio.

If you are trying to cut down on sodium intake in your meals, Ms Chan Sau Ling, a Senior Dietitian with the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, recommends making changes to

your diet gradually and consistently over a period of time, rather than trying to cut back on a large amount of sodium at once. This is to give some time for our taste buds to adapt to new flavours.

For instance, you can combine a reduced-sodium version of a favourite product (such as vegetable soup) with a regular version, before eventually weaning off the latter. In place of sodium as a seasoning, opt for herbs and spices such as garlic, oregano, and pepper (see box below).

Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is also commonly added to cooking to enhance the savoury flavour known as umami. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers the addition of MSG to foods to be generally safe, but excessive amounts may cause short-term, mild symptoms such as headaches, excessive thirst, and even drowsiness in some people. If you are thinking of incorporating MSG into your dishes, remember that the additive also contains sodium and it would be worthwhile to exercise restraint.



Try making changes to your diet gradually and consistently over a period of time, rather than trying to cut back on a large amount of sodium at once.



▲ A balanced diet contains foods from the major food groups: dairy, fruits, grains, proteins, and vegetables.

HPB has started a campaign to get people to cut their sodium intake by about 15 per cent over the next five years. Measures include recommendations to swap regular salt with healthier lower-sodium alternatives, and working with retailers to make such substitutes more affordable.

A lower-sodium salt option is expected to hit supermarket shelves this year, while another lower-sodium salt blend called K-Salt is already available at supermarkets such as FairPrice and Sheng Siong.

When shopping for groceries, choose food items with the Healthier Choice Symbol ("Lower in Sodium" and "No Added Sodium"). Above all, maintain a flavourful, well-balanced diet rich in whole grains, fresh vegetables, fruits, low-fat dairy products, and eggs. **LW**

SODIUM SUBSTITUTES Use these tasty options to flavour your meals.

Fresh herbs and spices ▶ A variety of herbs (parsley, coriander, basil, and mint) and spices (pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, cumin, and curry powder), or homemade salt-free seasoning blends will elevate your meal.

Garlic and onions (fresh or powdered) ▶ Cooked garlic, onions, leeks, chives, and scallions add another dimension to meats, soups, stews, pasta, and rice dishes.

Acids ▶ Acidic flavours like lemon juice and vinegars, as well as lemon zest, bring out the natural sweetness of ingredients, while adding an enticing aroma.

Flavoured vinegars ▶ A dash or two of apple cider vinegar, balsamic

vinegar, or sherry vinegar goes a long way in heightening the taste of marinades, sauces, vegetables, and meats.

Umami powder ▶ These "flavour bombs" are ingredient blends comprising dried mushrooms, onions, garlic, nutritional yeast, *tamari* (a Japanese version of soy sauce), seaweed and spices that improve the taste of food. Look out for those that contain little or no salt by checking the sodium content on the food labels.

Homemade bone broth, stocks, and gravy ▶ Not only do these "liquid gold" add flavour, they also boost the nutrient content of your meals. Make your own chicken bone broth, vegetable stock, or

fish stock at home, to control the amount of sodium.

Potassium chloride (also known as potassium salt)

▶ This natural mineral salt mined from rock and sea salt contains about 50 per cent less sodium than table salt. But it should be used sparingly as it carries a bitter aftertaste when used in larger amounts.

Note: If you suffer from kidney failure, heart failure, or diabetes, ask your doctor's advice before consuming salt substitutes with high potassium content.



Dr Mok Boon Rui.

PINNACLE FAMILY CLINIC

PEOPLE-CENTRED CARE

At his clinic in Sembawang Shopping Centre, Dr Mok sees newborn babies, seniors, and just about everyone in between. "Many patients come to me when they are young," he shares. "That means I'm right by their side as they pass life's major milestones, from starting primary school to enlisting in National Service, and even marriage." The 42-year-old family doctor believes that being a constant presence in his patients' lives leads to better health outcomes for them. "I know their medical histories like the back of my hand. This makes it easier for me to address new issues that may crop up," he says.

MEET YOUR
FAMILY
DOCTOR

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

Dr Mok Boon Rui believes in journeying with his patients through the different stages of their lives.

BY KEENAN PEREIRA PHOTOS AIK CHEN



"TELL US ABOUT YOUR EARLIEST INTERACTIONS WITH DOCTORS.

> Growing up, I was quite a sickly child. I would cough during physical activities and would have to 'sit out' playtime during my kindergarten days. My parents bought me to different doctors, including Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners. But we always ended up with a lot of medicine and not much of a cure.

WHAT WAS THE TURNING POINT?

> Having the right doctor played a vital role. We heard from a family friend about a very effective General Practitioner (GP) in Serangoon North, Dr Sim. During our first consultation, he patiently listened as my mother

shared my history with him. He did not interrupt her. Eventually, my condition was diagnosed as asthma. Thanks to Dr Sim's care and patience, my condition was brought under control.

DID YOU CONTINUE SEEING THIS GP?

> Yes, for many years, along with my parents and brother. We would travel to see him for care even after we had moved away from Serangoon North. My two children, now aged 10 and six years old, had their vaccinations done at his clinic. Dr Sim is now retired.

WERE YOU INFLUENCED BY HIM TO BECOME A DOCTOR?

> I think so. During secondary school, I had an inkling that I wanted to pursue medicine, because I was looking for a career where I could make a positive impact on people's lives. As a doctor, I can influence their health, which I feel is much more meaningful than other aspects of life. Before submitting my application for medical school, I visited Dr Sim for a chat on how a career in medicine would pan out. We talked for 30 minutes. That conversation summed up his philosophy on caring for his

patients: it was very holistic and genuine, and went beyond just the physical well-being aspects.

HOW DID YOUR DECISION TO BECOME A FAMILY DOCTOR COME ABOUT?

> I was drawn to the positive impact I could make on my patients' lives. As family doctors, we often see patients from when they are very young and then through life's various stages. This gives us a chance to build a close, yet professional, bond. This is quite different from other fields of medicine, where you are likely to see patients only when they are unwell.

In medical school, I learnt that many diseases are genetic and hereditary. Being a family doctor allows me to treat these diseases better, as I can spot trends within a family.

I had an elderly female patient who was suffering from breast cancer. Fortunately, she beat the disease. But a few years later, her daughter presented with breast cancer as well. As I knew her mother's medical history, I suggested that all her female relatives take a genetic risk assessment for hereditary breast cancer and complications related to it. Sure enough, they had a gene mutation that raised their risk of breast cancer. They opted for mastectomies and I'm happy to share that they are doing very well now. Such stories drive home the importance of knowing a family's medical history — and who better to do that than a family doctor?

WHAT WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT NEWS YOU HAD TO TELL YOUR PATIENTS?

> As doctors, we understand that death and illness are part of the job. But that understanding doesn't take away the pain I feel for patients, especially those whom I have known for years. Sometimes, family members thank me for helping and treating their loved ones before they passed on.

HOW DOES THE CLOSE BOND YOU HAVE WITH PATIENTS HELP IN SUCH CASES?

> As my patients have known me for a long time, they are frank

DID YOU KNOW...

SINGAPORE'S PRIMARY CARE NETWORK COMPRISES

1,800 GP CLINICS AND 23 POLYCLINICS.



and honest about things they may be uncomfortable telling others. For example, they may tell me about a lump that they are worried about, and I can then get it checked as soon as possible.

AS A LONG-TIME FAMILY DOCTOR, HOW DO YOU THINK THE NEW HEALTHIER SG INITIATIVE WILL HELP PATIENTS?

> From experience, I've seen the importance of a strong relationship between family doctors and patients. I think *Healthier SG* will strengthen this bond further by enrolling all Singaporeans with a family physician as their primary doctor, and to be their steward of care. This is something that some patients already enjoy but *Healthier SG* will increase this number.



A VITAL ALLY

"Preventive health is best centred on family doctors and less on surgeons and specialists in hospitals. Family doctors must then become the most important anchor of our healthcare system."

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung on the importance of family doctors and GPs. The terms are not interchangeable — family doctors undergo rigorous training and receive postgraduate academic qualifications and experience that are specific to Family Medicine.

HOW CAN PATIENTS BUILD A STRONG BOND WITH THEIR DOCTORS?

> It's important to remember that doctors cannot perform miracles. Patients must still make the effort to live healthily. With our increasing life expectancy, we should all try to eat and sleep better, exercise more, and take care of our mental health. Beyond this, a responsible person must also make it a point to find a doctor that he or she is comfortable with, and who is also ready to listen to his or her concerns, no matter how big or small.

YOU HAVE MENTIONED THE PRINCIPLES FOR A HEALTHIER LIFE. HOW DO YOU FOLLOW THESE?

> I can empathise with patients who have difficulty keeping a healthy weight. Fortunately, we live in an age where it's easy to find healthier food options. Most days, I opt for a salad for lunch but there are "cheat" days when I allow myself to have treats like chicken rice or *char kway teow*. But not too often though! Exercise and quiet time do wonders for my physical and mental health, although it can be hard to make time for exercise as a working father. My hack? Waking up 30 minutes before my kids to spend some time on the treadmill. **"LW**



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HEALTH 360

MONDAY

▶ BEETROOT FOR BRAIN BOOST

A handful of spinach, half a banana, a chopped-up beetroot, half a cup of frozen berries, a tablespoon of peanut butter and a cup of milk make for a power smoothie. Blitz all ingredients in a blender. Beetroot helps to keep the brain sharp by improving blood flow to the frontal lobe, which is linked with increased alertness.



TUESDAY

▶ AN OMELETTE FOR OOMPH

Dice a quarter of a capsicum and half an onion. Whisk two eggs with a bit of salt and pepper. Fry the capsicum and onion until soft, then pour the eggs over them. Flip after about two minutes. Garnish with a handful of raw spinach. This will see you through to lunch.

WEDNESDAY

▶ AVOCADOES ARE ACE

Avocado is one of the richest sources of folate, potassium, vitamin E, and magnesium. Mash half a ripe avocado with a sliced chilli (or more, if you can take the heat), some coriander, and a teaspoon of lime juice. Add a pinch of low-sodium salt. Slather a generous amount onto a slice of toasted bread.



THURSDAY

TUNA FOR THE HEART ▶

A can of tuna flakes is a great standby (choose those canned in water) for making a quick filling sandwich. For added fibre, spread the flakes on a bed of lettuce. Fish like tuna are an abundant source of omega-3 fats which help to prevent age-related heart diseases.



FRIDAY

▶ OATS ARE OOH SO GOOD

Top your bowl of oats with fresh fruit. Experts say all types of oatmeal are healthy, but it is best to avoid flavoured versions which can contain a lot of sugar. Oats contain beta-glucan, a type of fibre that can help lower cholesterol when eaten regularly.



SOURCES: BBC, HEALTHLINE, LEXWELL, HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD

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WORKOUT

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EAT WELL

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LIFESPACES

START IT RIGHT

CONQUER THE WORK
DAY WITH SUPER
BREAKFASTS THAT
KEEP YOU GOING.

WORKOUT

A GAME
TO RELISH

Why pickleball is catching on with people of all ages.

BY MORGAN AWYONG

RULES OF
THE GAME

1

You must serve from the baseline (or the back line of the court) and deliver the ball to the diagonal box of your opponent, using an underhand serve below the waist.

2

The serve cannot land in the no-volley zone (the field closest to the net) and there must be at least one bounce per side for the serve and return. This does not apply to the plays after, but the moves must stay as underhand hits.

3

Similar to other sports, ball play must occur within the boundaries of the court. If it heads out of bounds, the opponent wins a point and serves next.

4

The game ends at 11, 15 or 21 points. However, the winner(s) must win by at least two points. This means that if a player/team is at 11 points and the opponent is at 10, the game continues until a two-point lead is established.

We know the benefits of staying active, but keeping to such a regime can be a challenge. This certainly was the case for Ms Amanda Tan. The 55-year-old educator was determined to stay active during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thought she could combine her exercise regime with that of her daughter's, so they could spend time together. However, Ms Tan failed to factor in one major consideration — that her daughter, Hannah Esther Tan, is a heptathlete.

For the past three years, the younger Ms Tan, 24, has been taking part in heptathlons — gruelling multi-discipline track-and-field events that comprises 100-metre hurdles, high jump, shot put, a 200-metre run, long jump, javelin throw, and an 800-metre run.

There was no way Ms Amanda Tan could keep up exercising with her athlete daughter. "Heptathlete training is too demanding for me," she says. But through a casual invite from a family friend last year, the mother and daughter found a suitable sport to engage in together.

That sport is pickleball, which the pair now plays together once a week. "It is an equal playing field when it comes to pickleball," says Ms Amanda Tan. The relatively low-impact sport focuses on strategic gameplay and reflexes, thus levelling out the competition ground for players of any age and gender



MORE THAN
36 MILLION

PLAYED PICKLEBALL IN
THE US IN 2022

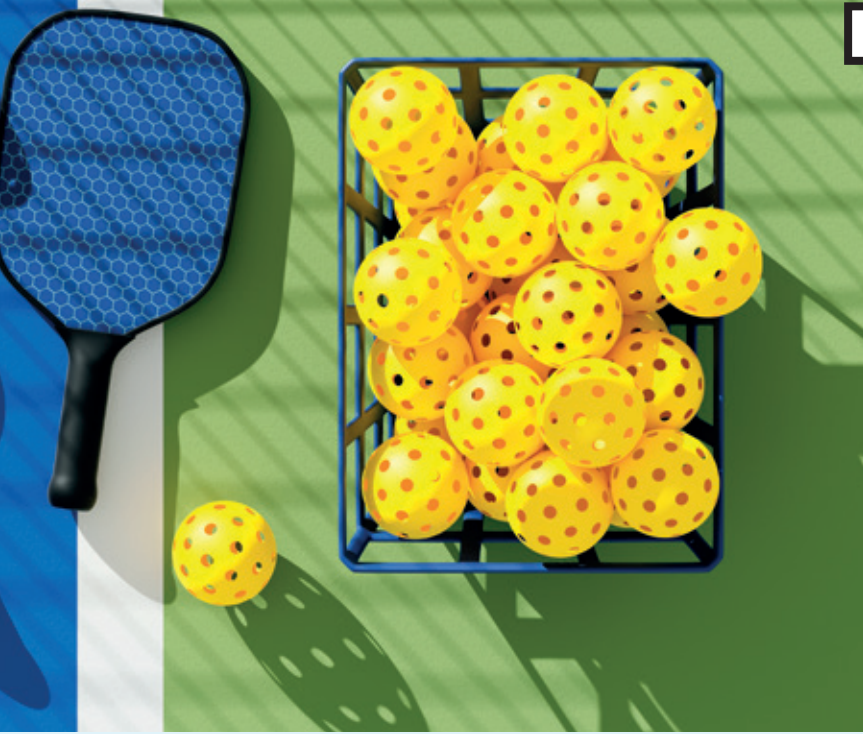
Source: The Association of
Pickleball Professionals

to enjoy. "There have been formidable female pairings that have beaten their male opponents on many occasions. This goes to show that pickleball is anyone's game," adds the younger Ms Tan.

A GROWING SPORT

Like in the United States (US), where pickleball originated, Singapore has seen a rising interest in the game. The Singapore Pickleball Association (SPA) estimates that about 1,500 people play the game here regularly. Mr Darren Ho, a SPA committee member and spokesperson, explains its appeal, "If you come to any of our practice sessions or tournaments, you will notice that pickleball is played between people of different ages and across generations."

▶ ABOUT PICKLEBALL



Combining elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis, pickleball was first invented in 1965 by three American fathers who wanted to play sport one weekend, but did not have all the right equipment. After rounding up some table-tennis paddles along with a plastic ball, they gathered at a badminton court in one of their homes and pickleball was born.

The game, with rules similar to that of badminton and played on a badminton court (or a space of a similar size), is easy to adopt. It can be played singles or doubles (though often doubles), with players using a paddle — slightly larger than a table tennis bat — to serve and volley a pickleball (a ball with perforated holes) above a low net — like tennis.

What started as a modified game soon soared in popularity in the US and, subsequently, around the world. Drawn by the lower nets and lighter paddles, fans grew to love the game as it offered health benefits without excessive exertion. The Association of Pickleball Professionals says more than 36 million Americans played pickleball in 2022.

Celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio and George Clooney are fans, while professional athletes such as LeBron James, Tom Brady, and Kevin Durant, have sparked more attention for the sport with their investments in professional pickleball teams.

Among the reasons behind the sport's rising popularity are the various health benefits it provides. "The game can be quite fast-paced, especially when all players are engaged in a volley exchange," says Mr Ho, 41. According to USA Pickleball, an hour of pickleball burns about 250 calories in just 30 minutes — double that of someone doing hatha yoga, or equivalent to high-impact step aerobics for the same duration.

A recent study by the *Science and Sports* journal cited the fun factor as to why people turn to the game, sharing that the enjoyment levels of playing pickleball for 30 minutes was 150 per cent more than walking for the same amount of time.

As it is a low-impact sport, pickleball attracts people with different physical conditions, especially older adults. The health benefits target common health issues found in this demographic. A study of participants aged 40 to 85 showed improved cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and cardiorespiratory fitness with an hour of play three times a week.

An aerobic activity, playing pickleball lends itself to the natural release of endorphins that relieve

stress and anxiety. Additional research shows that the game keeps minds sharp and improves hand-eye coordination.

It is this well-rounded combination of benefits that makes pickleball an ideal sport. "My reflexes have gotten faster and I've learnt to manage my impulsive nature. Playing pickleball with much older and experienced players has taught me the importance of maintaining composure and patience," says Ms Hannah Tan. She adds that, as a result, she feels less stressed and a lot less reactive to unpleasant situations.

As for the elder Ms Tan, her active ageing plans are now on track. "Pickleball has given me a renewed passion and purpose to stay fit and eat healthily to sustain my active ageing lifestyle for as long as I can," she says.

By introducing social and physical gains in a fun, casual way, pickleball has helped her overcome her sense of stagnation and emptiness during the pandemic. "This game has also inspired me to get back to my regular workouts at the gym, from which I have laid off for the last three to four years." **LW**

KEEN TO PLAY?

The SPA website (www.pickleballassociation.sg) is a great resource to find groups and locations to play the game.



PHOTOS: SINGAPORE PICKLEBALL ASSOCIATION, SHUTTERSTOCK

EAT
WELLEATING TO
A PLAN

Diets come and diets go. Here's a closer look at some that are not just a flash in the pan.

BY MORGAN AWYONG

In this day and age where diet plans are accessible online or can be bought pre-packed, you do not have to visit a Mediterranean country in order to have a Mediterranean Diet. This diet, together with the DASH Diet and the Flexitarian Diet, are the top three most popular eating plans.

They are listed as such in the 2023 report by *U.S. News & World Report*, a publication

known for its annual lists of rankings, with the Mediterranean Diet having held top place for the past five years and the other two as runners-up at least three times.

Currently, there are over 40 recognised diets, according to *CNN*, and it is difficult to keep track

of them all — even more so their nuances and health benefits.

When picking a diet, the first thing to understand is that there is not a single “best” diet you can try. Designed to help with different health goals, each diet's effectiveness varies, depending on an individual's general state of health. For example, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) advises that a diet for healthy ageing should consist of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and calcium-rich foods like milk, yogurt, and small fish with edible bones, as well as foods with less fat and salt.

Likewise, the HealthHub platform includes many recommendations, featuring diet tips to lower cholesterol by boosting fibre intake with legumes, vegetables, and wholegrains, as well as recipes for those with diabetes to eat well.

HOW TO CHOOSE A DIET

The best diet plan is one you can keep to.

➤ Identify your most immediate health goals or concerns — e.g., losing weight, lowering blood pressure — and choose diets that focus on them.

➤ Review the diet to see if it fits your lifestyle and budget. Think about the meal preparation required, food options when dining out, and cultural or religious factors.

➤ Evaluate the scientific evidence available online.

➤ Consult your doctor or health professional before embarking on the diet, and if you experience negative symptoms while you are on it. Some diets like the Keto Diet have a short period of withdrawal where symptoms like headaches, brain fog and nausea may occur.

5 POPULAR DIET PLANS



Mediterranean Diet

Inspired by traditional eating habits in southern Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the surrounding region, the Mediterranean Diet is based on longevity findings of the people living there, and is one of the most well-researched scientifically.

Health benefits ▶ Reduces risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, high cholesterol, dementia, memory loss, and depression. Also helps to build stronger bones and a healthier heart, and contributes to a longer life.

What to eat ▶ A variety of vegetables, nuts and legumes, whole grains and fresh fruits, with moderate portions of fish, poultry, and shellfish for protein. The use of olive oil in cooking is most preferred.

What to avoid ▶ Red and processed meats, and refined sugar from desserts.

Pros: Easy to follow with no calorie-counting or strict restrictions. Allows for the consumption of low amounts of red wine. The effectiveness of this diet is well-backed by extensive research.

Cons: More a lifestyle, it can be easy to 'stray' from this diet because there are no strict guidelines.



STILL UNSURE?

Moderation is the best way to go, as advised by top health agencies like the World Health Organization and the HPB. Eat healthy and follow the formula from HPB's My Healthy Plate – a quarter portion of brown rice or wholemeal bread, a quarter portion of meat, and half a portion of fruits and vegetables. Boost the effects by choosing water over sugary drinks, cooking with healthier oils and keeping active.



DASH Diet

DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, and is similar to the Mediterranean Diet in the food groups it focuses on. However, the DASH Diet includes recommended serving sizes.

Health benefits ▶ Primarily reduces high blood pressure. Also aids in weight loss and reducing cancer risk.

What to eat ▶ Balanced portions of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats.

What to avoid ▶ Most importantly, salt. Also red meat, added sugars, and fat.

Pros: Easy access to most ingredients.

Cons: Followers need to be disciplined to maintain the right portions.

Flexitarian Diet

A play on the words 'flexible' and 'vegetarian', a flexitarian diet is essentially a vegetarian diet with the occasional allowance for meat. Many studies agree that a plant-based diet contributes to a high-quality calorie intake that has better health impact. A flexitarian diet makes it somewhat easier for someone who enjoys eating meat to achieve their health goals.

Health benefits ▶ Reduced risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

What to eat ▶ Mainly fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains. Small amounts of meat, eggs, and dairy are permissible.

What to avoid ▶ Processed foods and refined sugar.

Pros: Easier to follow and adopt for someone who can't cut out meat from his/her diet.

Cons: Reducing meat consumption takes away sources of certain nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12, zinc, iron, and calcium, so supplements may be required.

Paleo

The idea behind the Paleo Diet is to eat like how our 'caveman' ancestors once did – which means no processed foods. It's similar in ethos to those who eat organic food in that they eschew modern techniques of farming for

the potential harm these bring from pesticides or harmful additives. This diet names processed foods as the culprit for many of today's ailments.

Health benefits ▶

Encourages weight loss and improves heart health by reducing cholesterol and blood pressure.

What to eat ▶ All meats are allowed with a focus on whole foods, so a grass-fed steak is preferred over sausages or spam. Vegetables, fruits, nuts, and seeds are good. Some paleo diet variants allow for dairy and tubers, such as potatoes and yam, to be included.

What to avoid ▶ Processed foods, sugar, and grains.

Pros: Can be easily adjusted from existing eating habits. Can be meat-heavy or plant-heavy depending on the individual's preferences.

Cons: Difficult for those who like snacks and desserts. Strict versions exclude grains, legumes, and dairy, which are nutritious.

Ketogenic

Of the many diets, the Ketogenic (or Keto) Diet seems to go against the grain by prioritising fat intake. It advises an intake of a very low amount of carbohydrates, moderate protein and high fat. The diet shifts the body into the metabolic state of ketosis, where the body burns sugar from fat rather than carbohydrates as its main energy source.

Health benefits ▶ Weight loss and improved heart health.

What to eat ▶ Fatty fish like salmon, sardines, and mackerel are great, and grass-fed meats that have more omega-3 fats. Eggs, cheese, and low-carb vegetables like broccoli, spinach, and cauliflower are also good.

What to avoid ▶ None.

Pros: Good for those who love their meats.

Cons: Can be difficult to measure and keep track of, and some research indicates that the diet is associated with several adverse metabolic and emotional side effects. [LW](#)



GROW A HEALTHIER YOU

Even if it is just a tiny plant in a pot, gardening can help with your physical and mental wellness.

BY RAFIDAH RAZAK



Tapping nature for therapy is not just about spending time in parks or other green spaces. At home, you can grow houseplants to help in relaxation and mood improvement. The activity also offers other health benefits.

> STRENGTHENS THE BODY

Gardening — even if it is just a few plants on the balcony or along a corridor — involves movement. At the very least, you would have to carry a filled watering can daily, and occasionally move your potted plants around. These short bursts of physical activity help strengthen joints and muscles, and improve flexibility.

> PROMOTES BETTER SLEEP

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States reported that gardening, due to the physical movements required, can help improve sleep habits. People who garden regularly are likely to get a solid seven hours of sleep at night.



> IMPROVES MENTAL HEALTH

Tending to growing things stimulates touch, smell, and sight. Being engaged in sensory experiences can help reduce anxiety, thus, boosting mood. Using gardening to improve mental health — known as horticultural therapy — may be an effective treatment for people with dementia, anxiety, and depression.

Gardening routines such as watering and pruning also create a soothing rhythm that can ease stress and anxiety. When we focus on a task at hand, we momentarily forget our worries and feel calmer.

> RESULTS IN BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES

Having potted plants in sight during a recovery period can make a difference. Patients in hospital rooms with plants and flowers have lower levels of pain, anxiety, fatigue, and blood pressure than patients in rooms without.

KNOW YOUR PLANTS

Gardening may appear overwhelming at first. Plants come in different sizes, colours, textures, and needs, and many of us have limited space in which to grow them. Here are some tips to get you started:

- To choose a plant of the appropriate size, determine how much floor space you can spare, before bringing it home.
- If a plant catches your eye, find out its specific needs. Different plants need varying amounts of water and light, as well as different soil types and fertiliser.
- Observe how much sun your home gets throughout the day in the area earmarked for your plants. This is so you can choose the right plants that will thrive under these conditions. You may need to invest in grow/artificial lights (pictured), or place your plants along a sunny corridor.



➤ **The National Parks Board website** (www.nparks.gov.sg/gardening/gardening-resources/what-to-grow) **has recommendations on the type of plant varieties that are suitable for Singapore's climate. It also provides resources on setting up an indoor garden.**

➤ **If you are a plant enthusiast, you can join Facebook groups such as Plant Swap Singapore (SG). Members swap plants but some also give plant cuttings or extra plants away.**

When you are ready to upgrade your garden, you can lease a plant plot from NParks under the Allotment Garden Scheme. This gives you an outdoor plot where you can explore more plant and tree varieties – including fruits and vegetables – which require continuous, direct sunlight that may not be available in your home or corridor. **LW**



Photo: NParks Facebook

CHOOSE YOUR PLANT TYPE



1 FOR BEGINNERS, HARDY PLANTS SUCH AS: peace lily, snake plant, money plant, and spider plant.

2 FOR HOMEGROWN EDIBLES ENTHUSIASTS: chilli, tomato, *bayam*, and *cai xin* (Note: these plants need at least four hours of direct sunlight a day).

3 FOR FANS OF HERBS: basil, laksa, pandan, and coriander (Note: these plants need regular fertilising and at least four hours of filtered sunlight a day, i.e., direct sunlight that is filtered by curtains, blinds, or awning).

4 FOR FLOWER LOVERS: African violet, bougainvillea, anthurium, and hibiscus.

STAY SAFE WHEN GARDENING

✓ **Pay attention to product labels when using chemicals. Pesticides, weed killers, and fertilisers can be hazardous to your health if inhaled or ingested. Wear gloves and masks as necessary.**



✓ **Be careful when using sharp tools.**

✓ **Take extra care when attending to plants with thorns or spikes.**

✓ **Gardening involves standing, bending, and other movements. Take a break or stop if you are tired.**



✓ **Check your garden frequently for mosquito breeding spots. Stagnant water may accumulate in plant pots and dishes, pails, and jars.**

READ *LIFEWISE* ONLINE!



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SPOTLIGHT

▶ ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

NHG management and staff were among 100,000 people recognised for their contributions towards Singapore's fight against COVID-19.

> **More than 100,000 individuals**, as well as teams in the public, private, and people sectors were honoured with special state awards by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) for doing their part in the nation's fight against the pandemic. Senior management and staff from the NHG Family were among the recipients of the awards.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE STAR (COVID-19)



PROFESSOR PHILIP CHOO
Group CEO, NHG



PROFESSOR LEO YEE-SIN
Executive Director, National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID)

THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION MEDAL (GOLD) (COVID-19)

Professor Jason Cheah
Deputy Group CEO (Accountable Care), and CEO, Woodlands Health (WH)

Professor Eugene Fidelis Soh,
Deputy Group CEO (Integrated Care), NHG, and CEO, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) & Central Health

Professor Chua Hong Choon
Deputy Group CEO (Strategy & Transformation), NHG, and CEO, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) & Yishun Health

Professor Benjamin Seet,
Deputy Group CEO (Education & Research), NHG

Associate Professor Nicholas Chew
Chairman Medical Board, WH

Associate Professor Yong Keng Kwang
Group Chief Nurse, NHG

Assistant Professor Shawn Vasoo
Clinical Director, NCID

Ms Samantha Ong
Director, Operations, Institute of Mental Health (IMH)

Dr Hoi Shu Yin
Chief Nurse, TTSH

Shirley Heng
Chief Nurse, KTPH & Yishun Health

Ms Pua Lay Hoon
Chief Nurse, WH

Dr Margaret Soon
Director of Nursing, NCID

▶ SHARING THE FESTIVE JOY

Dr Janil Puthucheariy celebrated Lunar New Year with staff and patients at NCID.



Photos: National Centre for Infectious Diseases

On 22 January 2023, Dr Janil Puthucheariy, Senior Minister of State for Health, and Communications & Information, visited the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) on the first day of the Lunar New Year. Dr Janil distributed mandarin oranges to the staff and patients. He also conveyed well-wishes to the patients.



VISITED HEALTHCARE WORKERS AT NCID WHO WERE ON DUTY DURING CHINESE NEW YEAR. THEIR MORALE IS BETTER, AND WORK IS A BIT LESS HECTIC NOW COMPARED TO DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. VERY GRATEFUL TO ALL THE HEALTHCARE TEAM. DURING THE PANDEMIC THEY STAYED AT THEIR POSTS, DID THEIR DUTY AND CARED FOR US. THEY STILL DO SO NOW. WISHING ALL GOOD HEALTH IN THE YEAR OF THE RABBIT!"

DR JANIL PUTHUCHEARIY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR HEALTH, AND COMMUNICATIONS & INFORMATION

▶ SUPPORTING RESIDENTS' HEALTHCARE JOURNEY

New Jalan Kayu Community Health Club encourages residents to take charge of their health through subsidised health screenings and more.



The pilot project aims to bring preventive health and chronic disease management to the neighbourhood. We hope that this ground-up effort will form an ecosystem to help our residents access a network of health, social, and community support, facilitated by grassroots leaders and volunteers as trusted connectors.”

Ms Ng Ling Ling, Member of Parliament, Ang Mo Kio GRC



> **To promote early detection of common chronic diseases and individual responsibility for one's own health**, the Jalan Kayu Citizens' Consultative Committee opened the Jalan Kayu Community Health Club (JKCHC) on 4 February 2023.

The Club was officially launched by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Also present were Ms Ng Ling Ling, Member of Parliament (MP), Ang Mo Kio GRC; Professor Eugene Fidelis Soh, Deputy Group CEO (Integrated Care), National Healthcare Group (NHG), and CEO, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) & Central Health; and Ms Loh Shu Ching, Executive Director, TTSH & Central Health.

JOIN THE CLUB

JKCHC offers monthly subsidised screenings for metabolic diseases, including hypertension and diabetes, to residents above the age of 40 living in Jalan Kayu.

Programmes such as health talks and group coaching that target those with higher health risk have also begun with TTSH. More will be supported by the Central Health network of health and social care providers. A group of residents with metabolic

syndromes were invited by JKCHC to attend the coaching sessions and they have since graduated, marking the start of their healthier-living journey.

In conjunction with *Healthier SG*, JKCHC is partnering General Practitioners (GPs) in the neighbourhood in a pilot project to refer patients with metabolic conditions to the Club. This provides the patients with added support to manage their conditions, and to keep up with health plans through health screening and joint care consultations.



Residents are encouraged to track and monitor their health closely with support from JKCHC.



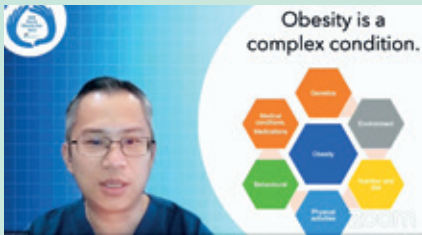
The first batch of residents who completed the chronic illness group coaching sessions.



NHG World Obesity Day public exhibition at the Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) atrium.

▶ RAISING AWARENESS ON A WEIGHTY ISSUE

The NHG World Obesity Day 2023 webinar offered insights into this chronic disease.



> **Obesity poses an increased risk** for serious health conditions that affects the quality of life. Singapore's obesity rate is rising alongside a worrying global trend, with one in four people estimated to be living with the condition worldwide by 2025, while child obesity is set to double in the next 10 years. While obesity is a complex condition that is shaped by genetic and environmental factors, there remains a misconception that managing obesity is just about eating less and moving more.

On 4 March 2023, the National Healthcare Group (NHG) Diabetes & Metabolic Steering Committee held the World Obesity Day 2023 Webinar, which saw close to 300 participants tuning in. They gained valuable insights from experts who tackled key topics such as sustaining healthy food habits, staying active and avoiding weight rebound, as well as exploring medical and surgical treatments.

Participants also heard from patients between the ages of 26 and 59 who had successfully managed and tackled obesity. A public exhibition on how to better tackle obesity was held at the atrium of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), and at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH).

“PERSONS WITH OBESITY STILL FACE SELF-BLAME FOR THEIR CONDITION, AND THAT WEIGHT STIGMA CAN LEAD TO REDUCED SELF-ESTEEM, AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES. THUS, PEOPLE ARE LESS LIKELY TO SEEK HELP EARLY DUE TO THE STIGMA.”

DR LEE YINGSHAN, CONSULTANT, TTSH, AND ORGANISING CHAIRMAN OF NHG WORLD OBESITY DAY 2023



A visitor at the exhibition penning messages of encouragement to persons with obesity.



Informative panels and pamphlets on managing obesity were displayed at the exhibition.

▶ TRANSFORMING PRIMARY CARE HEALTH PRACTICES THROUGH INNOVATION

The inaugural Singapore Primary Care Conference provided primary care professionals the opportunity to upskill, network, and learn best practices in creating a robust and sustainable healthcare system.



The Singapore Primary Care Conference 2023.

The first Singapore Primary Care Conference (SPCC) 2023 on 3 and 4 March 2023 at Raffles City Convention Centre brought together over 700 primary care professionals to exchange ideas and share knowledge on topics relevant to primary care practice. Themed ‘Strength in Unity: New Frontiers in Primary Care’, the conference focused on how primary care providers have emerged stronger after the COVID-19 pandemic, to transform and build a more robust, responsive, and sustainable healthcare system for the population.

The conference was co-organised by the College of Family Physicians Singapore, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP), National University Polyclinics, and SingHealth Polyclinics. It was opened

by Guest-of-Honour, Professor Chee Yam Cheng, President, Singapore Medical Council and Chairman, National General Practitioner Advisory Panel.

“During COVID-19, primary care providers came together to support each other in providing care for the patients. This was made possible through the strong relationships and collaborations in the primary care community. Post-pandemic, we must continue to build up primary care and preventive health as the foundation of our healthcare system to better serve our patients and the community,” said Associate Professor Chong Phui-Nah, Chief Executive Officer, NHGP and Primary Care, and Co-Chair, Organising

Committee, Singapore Primary Care Conference 2023.

SPCC 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

The event consisted of four plenary sessions, five symposiums, pre-conference workshops, and a polyclinic learning visit where General Practitioners experienced and gained further insights into the multidisciplinary team-based approach by polyclinics to provide care to patients. The conference also featured healthcare experts from Singapore and overseas, who shared more about care models of the future, innovation and technology in primary care, and the latest clinical updates on common conditions encountered in the primary care setting.



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