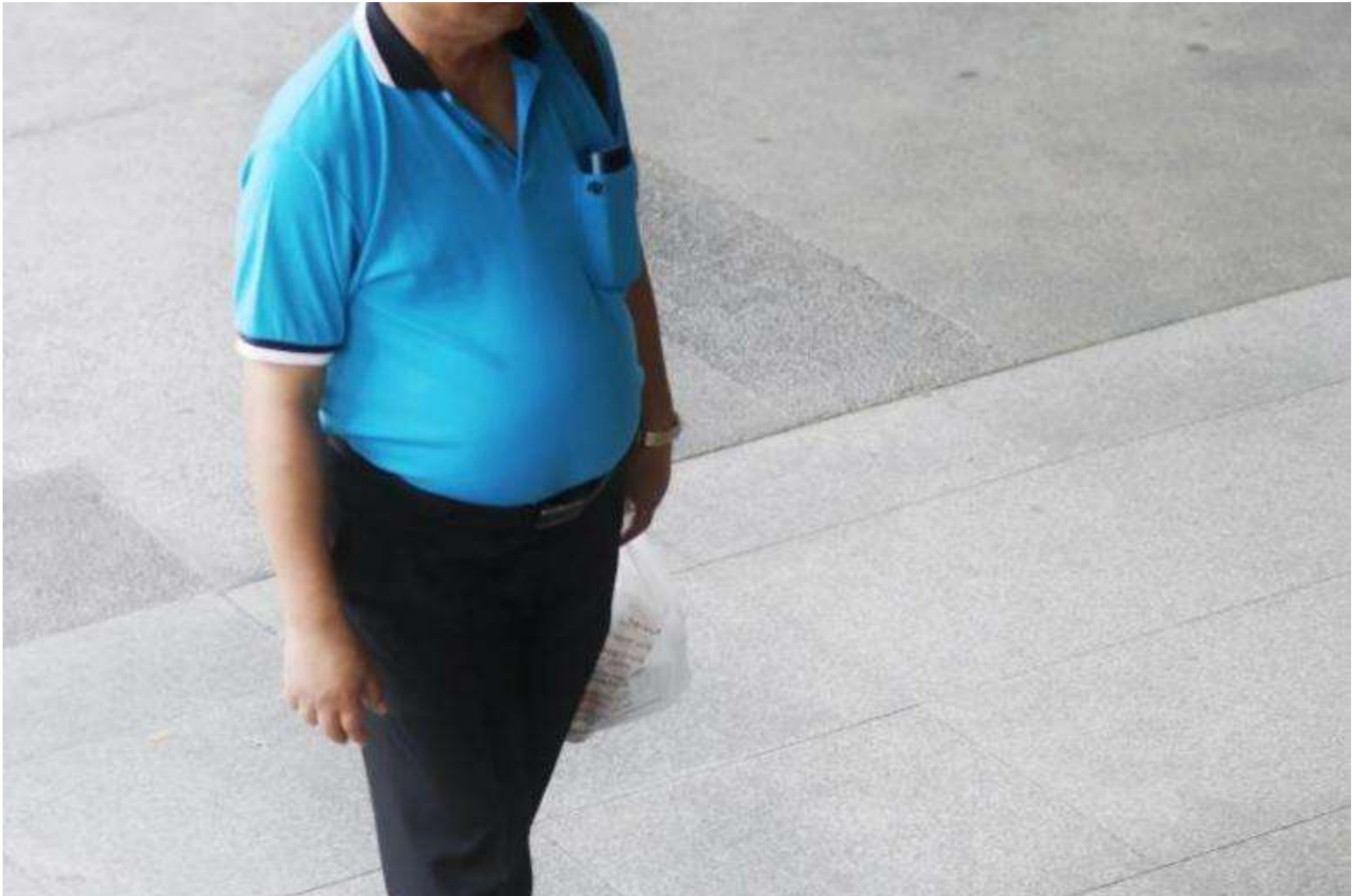


Webinar tackles stigma which may lead to obese people not seeking help



A recent survey revealed that 20.7 per cent of Singaporeans fell in the high risk BMI category of 27.5 and above. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - Obesity is on the rise in Singapore but stigma about the condition - such as being associated with laziness and a lack of self-discipline - may make people less likely to seek help, medical and mental health experts said.

The National Healthcare Group on Saturday (March 5) held a World Obesity Day webinar, which addressed the issue and also covered exercise and healthy eating. It drew some 350 attendees on Zoom and Facebook Live.

Dr Lee Yingshan, an endocrinology consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), who spoke at the event, said obesity is wrongly seen as a result of poor lifestyle choices.

"(It's a misconception that) simply eating less and moving more will cure obesity," she added. "This has led to finger-pointing at those afflicted with the condition. People with obesity also begin to think that it is their fault."

This comes as the National Population Health Survey, which was conducted between July 2019 and March 2020, revealed that 20.7 per cent of Singaporeans fell in the high-risk body mass index category of 27.5 and above - an increase of two percentage points since 2017.

Obesity is associated with Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and cardiovascular diseases such as stroke and heart disease. It is also related to conditions such as knee arthritis and gall bladder disease.

Ms Carol Lin, a senior psychologist at National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP), noted that stigma can increase one's vulnerability to depression and eating disorders.

"The fear of shame and discrimination could also become a psychological barrier to seeking help for obesity and mood-related issues," she said.

Dr Lee expressed the hope for people to see obesity as a condition, and be able to broach the topic without judgment.

A patient at TTSH's weight management service, Ms Sherina Pour, 49, was about 80kg at her heaviest.

"When I take the bus, or when I'm in the elevator, people would stare at me and make me feel as if I'm occupying too much space," the senior manager in sales operations said.

Ms Sherina was referred to TTSH in 2020 after seeking help for sleep apnea, a sleep disorder in which breathing repeatedly stops and starts.

"When my youngest brother went for surgery to remove most of his stomach as he was morbidly obese, his sleep apnea drastically improved. That's when I realised I needed to do something about my weight," she said.

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Under the service, Ms Sherina, who has polycystic ovary syndrome - a hormonal disorder that can cause one to gain weight, sees a nutritionist every three months to review her diet.

Since 2020, she has cut down on soft drinks, chocolate and fried food, and makes an effort to exercise by going on walks and taking the stairs.

"I can breathe better now and my energy levels are higher," she said, adding that she is now about 75kg.

Dr Donna Tan, an assistant director of clinical services at NHGP, said that people with obesity are at greater risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.

Type 2 diabetes is largely diet-related and develops over time. Type 1 diabetes is genetic.

She noted that the National Population Health Survey showed the prevalence of diabetes has risen from 8.8 per cent in 2017 to 9.5 per cent for the period of 2019 to 2020.

To help people with obesity lose weight in a healthy way, NHGP started a weight management programme called Lighter Life in 2018.

Those with early disease like diabetes or high blood pressure, and those with knee or back pain, can also join the six-month-long programme.

Dr Tan, who is a family physician, said: “A major component of the programme is group motivation and peer support.. which will continue after it ends, when the patients carry on with physical exercise and sustained weight loss.”

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