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HEAL cover story



Engaging in healthy behaviour even later in life can prevent, delay and control diseases. PIC SOURCE LIGHTHOUSE NEWS DAILY.COM



STEPS TO HEALTHY AGEING



A healthy diet is important, especially as we age. PIC SOURCE FORBES.COM

A healthy diet and a positive outlook are keys to growing old gracefully, writes **Kasmiah Mustapha**

“**A**GE is just a number” and “We are only as old as we feel” are common mantras about growing old. For some, being older does not stop them from doing the things they love because they are physically fit.

For others, ageing means facing various illnesses. Some are bedridden and need constant care. With deteriorating quality of life, the concept of healthy ageing is foreign to them.

Columbia Asia Hospital medical officer Dr Geetha Palaniappan says ageing is a continuous process and so are all the changes that are simultaneously occurring in our body.

“Different individuals age differently, depending on factors such as genetics, environment and lifestyle. Taking care of one’s health is not the same as compared to 30 years ago because the things we are exposed to currently are not the same as 30 years ago.

“These include chemicals in our food, the environment and the stress levels we experience. With the harsh environment our body goes through, it should be no surprise that it ages faster too, both internally and externally.

“Because of this, over the last few years, there are more people diagnosed with early onset of chronic diseases such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes and high cholesterol.”

Dr Geetha says modern medicine has made it possible for people to live longer. However, the quality of life depends on the physical condition of a person.

“Quality of life is directly linked to the well-being of a person. Those in poor physical condition are more prone to falls, hospi-

talisation, illness and have a slower recovery rate compared to those of the same age who are in better shape.

“Adopting a healthier lifestyle, even later in life, can prevent, delay and control diseases. In fact, research has shown that a healthy lifestyle is more important than genes in avoiding poor health as you age. A healthy lifestyle helps you to not only avoid frailty but also saves you on expensive medical bills later.”

She says there are several benefits to healthy ageing including better quality of life, increased lifespan, being independent, reduced risk of lifestyle-related diseases and reduced cost of treatment.

COGNITIVE DECLINE

According to Dr Geetha, it is estimated that 20 per cent of people aged 55 years or older experience some type of mental health concern.

It is a known fact that mental health has an important effect on physical health and vice versa.

She says cognitive decline is an inevitable process of ageing. However, steps can be taken to slow down these age-related changes such as:

- Regular exercise
- Eating antioxidant-rich fruit and vegetables such as blueberries, strawberries and broccoli.
- Regular visits to the doctor. If you are on medication prescribed by different doctors, you must inform them to avoid drug interaction. Avoid doctor shopping and disclose your medical history honestly for optimum care.
- Keep yourself mentally alert by engaging in challenging cognitive tasks. Such activities protect against decline in cognitive

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Keep yourself mentally alert to reduce risk of cognitive decline. PIC SOURCE WASHINGTON.EDU

“Adopting a healthier lifestyle, even later in life, can prevent, delay and control diseases.”

Dr Geetha Palaniappan

function and development of Alzheimer's disease. They include crossword puzzles, sudoku, reading and learning new things like photography.

MANAGE STRESS

Studies have found that chronic stress will accelerate the ageing process. Dr Geetha says too much of anything is bad and that includes stress.

“A small amount of stress is necessary for optimal functioning. However, when it is poorly managed, one may face many negative outcomes.”

- It is important to manage stress by:
- Exercise, doing yoga, having a massage and engaging in sports and hobbies.
 - Taking a break.
 - Engaging in effective communication both at the workplace and at home. This is the benchmark of your support system.
 - Short term psychotherapy. Do not be ashamed to ask for help. When you are overwhelmed by a situation, seek help from a professional.
 - Change your perspective or expectation of others. Think objectively and not emotionally.

KEEP A POSITIVE MIND

In addition to healthy ageing, it is also important to have positive ageing.

According to the Australian Psychological Society, positive ageing is the process of maintaining a positive attitude, feeling good about yourself, keeping fit and healthy, and engaging fully in life as you age.

Dr Geetha says people who have positive thinking and attitude have a better coping

ability and a better outlook on life.

According to research, positive people have lower levels of inflammation and heart risk.

Try these healthy thinking strategies to stay positive:

- Smile and surround yourself with positive people.
- Take responsibility for events in your life. Do not play victim. Instead, take charge of your own life.
- Do not dwell on your mistakes or past. Be aware of the present and see how you can be a better person.
- Be grateful.
- Change your negative thoughts.

DIET

Unhealthy diet is one of the reasons that cause multiple illnesses as we age, such as diabetes and hypertension.

According to Columbia Asia Hospital dietitian Kong Woan Fei, our metabolism slows down as we age. Because of this, our health and life change gradually and how we eat and how active we are will determine our biological age.

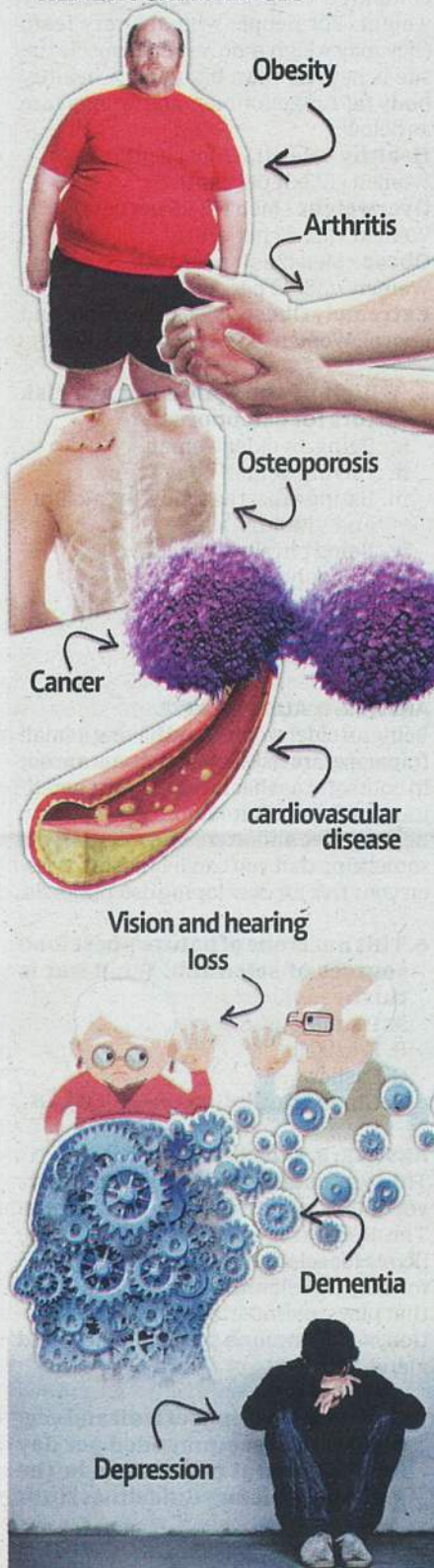
- Choose a healthy eating pattern to match your calorie need. Limit high fat and high sugar foods that contribute to high calories.
- Consume adequate protein such as lean meat, poultry and fish. Egg, beans and legumes provide protein as well.
- Ageing affects one's sense of taste. Choose low sodium food and replace salt with herbs and spices to enhance flavour during cooking.
- Choose high calcium food or calcium fortified food such as dairy products and vitamin D rich food. Calcium in food has a better absorption rate than supplements.
- Choose high fibre food. Slow digestion and constipation often occur with ageing. Choose fibre from vegetables, fruit and whole grain products.
- Do regular exercise to help build muscle strength, improve balance and flexibility. It will reduce your risk of falling and minimises muscle loss.

Weight bearing exercises help preserve bone density and aerobic exercises keep our heart and lungs healthy.

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A GREYING NATION

HEALTH CHALLENGES



By 2030, 1 in 8 person is aged 65 and above worldwide



MALAYSIA'S AGEING POPULATION (*estimated)

LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH



STEPS TO HEALTHY AGEING



Sources : Social Security Research, Centre University Malaya, WebMD, Johns Hopkins Medicine, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention