



AGEING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The World Health Organisation celebrates World Health Day on 7 April with the focus on Ageing and Health. *Lifewise* takes a look at the ageing in Singapore today, health issues concerning seniors, and the policies being put in place to meet their needs.

In 1970, a Singaporean man could expect to live until the age of 68. For women, it was 64 years. Just four decades on, that number has not so much crept upwards but jumped. Thanks to improvements in hygiene and sanitation, medical advancements and a growing awareness about healthy living, the average life expectancy of a Singaporean man is now 80 years while a Singaporean woman can expect to live until 85.

But can Singapore make that leap to deal with the requirements of this changing demographic? After all, the country has one of the fastest ageing populations in Asia. In 2009, 8.8 per cent of population was aged 65 and above. By 2030, that number will rise to 18.7 per cent. At a recent Ministerial Committee on Ageing (MCA) Aged Care Sector Stakeholder's Dialogue in January this year, Minister for Health Mr Gan Kim Yong said, "We must be ready to gear up and plan ahead — our services, our facilities and our capabilities — to better support the evolving needs of our growing population of seniors".

The country's preparation for the 'silver tsunami' began in 1999 when the Singapore government set up the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Ageing Population. In 2001, the Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports drew up the Eldercare Masterplan and in 2004, formed the Committee on Ageing

Issues. One of the latter's recommendations was to ensure that the elderly have access to a seamless continuum of healthcare and elder-care services addressing a diverse range of needs.

To achieve these objectives, various institutions have stepped up their efforts in putting up programmes aimed at health promotion, public education, disease prevention as well as the screening and early detection of illness and disability.

Examples of these include the Stepping Out Into Active Life programme initiated by Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) — which is designed to lower the risk of falls among elders — and the Chronic Disease Self-Management programme that aims to empower elderly participants into leading healthier and more independent lives.

As Mr Gan noted, "Active ageing will remain a priority going forward. We will be aggressively pushing for preventive screening and promoting a more healthy lifestyle among seniors, so that they can remain active and healthy for as long as possible".

In addition to active ageing, the other top priority for the MCA is enhancing aged care. "In this, the government's goals are simple," Mr Gan said. "These are to improve access to, the quality of, and the affordability of healthcare facilities and services."



BY NIRMALA SIVANATHAN IN CONSULTATION WITH DR NEO HAN YEE, REGISTRAR, GERIATRIC MEDICINE, MS TERESA NG, SENIOR DIETITIAN AND MS LEE SIN YI, SENIOR PHYSIOTHERAPIST, TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL



THE HEALTH REPORT CARD

The Singapore Longitudinal Ageing Study, conducted in 2009, interviewed 2,808 Singaporeans aged 59 to 98 years old, and found that a high proportion suffered from chronic illnesses. Nine out of 10 seniors suffered from at least one chronic illness while 43 per cent had at least three co-morbid conditions (wherein patients suffer from at least three conditions concurrently or simultaneously). Out of these, the most common were high cholesterol (59 per cent), high blood pressure (56 per cent) and major eye disorders (33 per cent). The most common psychiatric conditions were cognitive impairment such as incipient dementia (24 per cent) and depression (13 per cent).

“Our physical body declines as we age,” says Dr Neo Han Yee, Registrar at the Department of Geriatric Medicine at TTSH. “In the cardiovascular system for example, there is atrophy of the ventricular muscles, calcification of the heart valves and reduction in blood vessel elasticity.”

In addition, airways and lung tissue lose elasticity, resulting in decreased oxygen intake and exchange. The muscles near the rib cage atrophy, reducing the ability to breathe deeply, cough and expel carbon dioxide.

According to Dr Neo, there is a general loss in lean muscle mass with accompanying gain in fat deposits as we age. This results in some loss of muscle tone and strength. Because of this, calcium is lost and bones become less



dense. This may lead to osteoporosis and a reduction of weight-bearing capacity, thereby increasing susceptibility to low-impact fractures. Our joints also undergo changes from wear and tear. Other complications include the reduction in the production of hydrochloric acid, digestive enzymes and saliva. Seniors may also develop impaired swallowing and delayed emptying of the stomach. The breakdown and absorption of foods may also be less effective, resulting in vitamin deficiencies and in extreme of cases, malnutrition.

MAKING THINGS RIGHT

Besides the physical impact of ageing, there is also the mental aspect that should be considered.

The Singapore Longitudinal Ageing Study also managed to identify demographic status, psychosocial support, spirituality and nutrition as important factors for successful ageing. Other studies done in the West also identified a link between successful ageing and greater physical activity, more social interactions and an absence of depression — among other factors.

Changing their attitudes towards sexuality can also contribute towards seniors leading a better quality of life. Dr Neo says, “In the elderly, sexuality is viewed as an expression of passion, affection, and loyalty. It affirms physical functioning, maintains a sense of identity, establishes self-confidence and helps prevent anxiety. Sexuality is an integral part of life and is inextricably bound to physical and mental wellbeing. It should not be confined to reproductive years alone.”

GETTING PHYSICAL

As with people in other age groups, regular aerobic exercise is important in maintaining cardiovascular fitness. However, staying active is especially important for the elderly as being agile helps in preventing falls. Dr Neo adds that, “exercise programmes that focus on promoting balance in the elderly are known to reduce the risk of falls”.

Some studies examining the effect of *tai chi* have yielded positive results with regards to fall prevention. In addition, resistance exercises have been shown to slow down the development of sarcopenia — a condition characterised by the progressive loss of muscle power and strength. Resistance training, which involves using one’s own body weight against itself when working out, includes exercises such as squats and crunches.

Dr Neo says that there is no strong evidence to recommend specific lifestyle modifications with the intention to prevent cognitive decline and dementia. “However, there is much benefit — and no harm — to be



LOSING AN APPETITE FOR LIFE

It might seem odd in a country, where food and eating are cornerstones of local culture, that malnutrition can still rear its ugly head. But the fact remains that malnutrition is still a problem for the elderly, especially for the very old and frail.

Ms Teresa Ng, Senior Dietitian at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, explains that malnutrition is a common phenomenon in the elderly as it can arise from multiple factors. For example, she cites social factors such as the absence of a care-giver or poor family support coupled with an inability to buy or prepare food as well as dietary misconceptions due to cultural and religious food practices. Psychological factors such as depression, the loss of a spouse or family members, grief and loneliness can also play a part.

There are other contributing factors as well. “Poor dentition or absence of teeth, cognitive impairment due to underlying conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer’s, and other disease-related and physiological factors can also lie at the root of the problem,” adds Ms Ng.

POOR APPETITE? HERE’S HOW TO IMPROVE IT

- ▶ Have small, frequent meals and snacks throughout the day.
- ▶ Incorporate your favourite foods into your diet.
- ▶ Some snack ideas you can include into your diet are egg, tuna or sardine sandwiches, soy bean curd dessert, milkshakes, green or red bean soups, yogurt, pastries and biscuits.
- ▶ Eat according to stipulated meal times rather than reacting to hunger pangs.
- ▶ When possible, enjoy your meals with family members. Eating with loved ones can improve one’s mood, which in turn improves appetite.
- ▶ In the event that appetite remains poor, consider taking oral nutritional supplements. There is a wide variety of supplements in the market designed for different conditions, so seek your dietitian’s advice prior to commencement.

gained from keeping your mind active and participating in physical and social activities.” he says.

Doing puzzles and word games, learning a new language, playing a musical instrument, reading and writing are good activities for keeping the mind supple and sharp, while light exercises such as walking, swimming and even dancing are great for physical fitness. +