

Start early, take health seriously

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysians should begin prioritising their health from a young age, as early habits play a critical role in shaping quality of life in later years, experts say.

They stressed that preventive care and healthy lifestyle choices adopted early can delay the onset of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and support stronger physical and socio-emotional well-being in old age.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing (MyAgeing) research officer Chai Sen Tyng said good health extends beyond the absence of disease, encompassing the ability to live meaningfully and enjoy life.

"A simple suggestion would be, regardless of your age, to take good care of your health physically and socio-emotionally," said Chai.

"Good health is not just being disease-free but also having the ability to enjoy life and find meaning in your existence."

He added that while many individuals will inevitably develop illness or disability over time, this should not define their worth or quality of life.

"The World Health Organization has a useful construct. We can imagine different trajectories for the majority.

"Those who live beyond the average life expectancy are survivors, first and foremost. Of course, most would age with some form of disease and disability.

"If healthy ageing means disease-free, that is defined as 'successful ageing'.

"We should encourage our people, young and old, to take care of themselves and delay the onset of diseases for as long as possible. Preventive health is the cheapest form of medicine," he said.

Chai added that those living with illness should seek treatment and manage their

conditions properly, noting that "living with diseases and disability does not diminish a person's worth".

He also called for continued state support for vulnerable groups, stressing that access to healthcare and social protection is essential for dignified ageing.

Meanwhile, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia School of Liberal Studies dean and public health medicine specialist Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh said the rising burden of NCDs in Malaysia reflects the long-term consequences of unhealthy habits formed early in life.

"To start with, the NCD burden has risen globally and Malaysia included. This has extended into the 'golden ages', hence people are living with NCDs and subsequently suffer poorer health," she said.

Prof Sharifa noted that conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, stroke and cancer often lead to complications such as reduced mobility, organ failure and dimin-

ished quality of life.

"Many also started practising poor life choices when they were younger, such as eating too much, cigarette smoking and sedentary lifestyles," she said.

Prof Sharifa stressed that health education and equitable access to care must begin early and be made universally available, regardless of income.

"For that matter, this must be started from an early age, as whatever is practised will become fixed and difficult to change for the better.

"Health education and good access must be provided to the masses, disregarding their ability to pay," she said.

Prof Sharifa also pointed to gaps in elderly healthcare coverage, noting that many lose employer-provided benefits and later face prohibitive insurance costs.

"So, add-on insurance or supplementary insurance for elderly should be offered at an affordable price," she said.