

Good nutrition is essential for healthy ageing.

By SHEELA CHANDRAN
star2@thestar.com.my

THE elderly still lack knowledge of food and nutrients which are good for health, says UKM Faculty of Health Sciences deputy dean (Research & Innovation) Prof Dr Suzana Shahar.

“Through advertisements, senior citizens are aware that calcium-enriched foods are vital for strong bones and high cholesterol levels can increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases. But many retirees have minimal information on the nutritional content of vegetables, fruits and legumes,” says Dr Suzana, who spoke on *Nutritional Needs For The Elderly* during the 9th Malaysian National Geriatrics Conference in Kuala Lumpur recently.

Equally worrying is the high prevalence of Vitamin D deficiency among elderly Malaysians. She encourages senior citizens to increase their calcium and Vitamin D intake by consuming one serving of milk each day.

Natural resources

“*Tempeh*, tofu, green leafy vegetables and anchovies are rich in calcium. Expose skin to sunlight between 9am and 11am for at least 10 minutes as the sun’s radiation is a natural source of Vitamin D,” says Dr Suzana, adding that women and men should consume 1,000mg and 800mg of calcium respectively daily.

Tempeh provides calcium and isoflavones for post-menopausal women at risk of low bone mass. It provides similar amounts of absorbed calcium as that obtained from milk, says a recent study conducted by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Faculty of Health Sciences, in collaboration with Universiti Putra Malaysia and Cornell University in the United States.

“Thus *tempeh* may provide readily available calcium for our population of women who are at risk of low bone mass,” says Dr Suzana.

Besides nutritious food, she explains that knowledge in safe food handling is equally important to reduce the risk of falling sick among the elderly.

“Most elderly folks suffer from loss of smell due to physiological changes in ageing. They are unable to detect rancid food or strong odours. Steps should be taken to teach them how to identify signs of rotten food items and raise awareness on food safety,” says Dr Suzana, adding that promotions and advertisements should be increased to create awareness on the benefits of nutrition.

She adds that the key to good health is to consume food in moderation in accordance to the food pyramid. A healthy diet should contain different types of food, minimum fat, more grains (bread, pastas and rice that contain carbohydrates for energy), vegetables, fruits and a good mix of milk and protein. Six to eight glasses of water daily are also recommended.

Watch what you eat



Go green: A healthy diet should contain different types of food and a fair share of vegetables and fruits.

“Switch to *basmati* rice as it is a low-glycemic food. Take two to three servings of protein daily (an egg for breakfast and one meat item – preferably fish or chicken – for lunch and dinner).

“People have a misconception about the amount of protein consumed daily. Some Malaysians tend to eat several protein-based items such as fish, squid and chicken in one sitting, and this is unhealthy. The plate should contain more than a quarter serving of vegetables and fruits,” she says.

As the elderly may have difficulty chewing certain fruits and fibrous vegetables, healthcare providers should be more creative and prepare meals to suit the needs of the elderly.

“Care-givers can prepare minced diet meals, fruit and vegetable juices, and soft food to meet the nutritional requirements of the elderly,” says Dr Suzana.

Besides a healthy diet, exercise complements good health, she explains.

“Aerobic and muscle strengthening exercises should be combined to increase muscle mass and burn off calories. Brisk walking is one of the best ways to increase oxygen intake.”

Secrets to longevity

Good nutrition is essential for healthy ageing, hence the interest in the diets of populations in Okinawa, parts of Sardinia (Italy) and Ikaria, a Greek island off the coast of Turkey, that have been associated with longevity.

“Diet contributes significantly to health and longevity. What we eat is important and diets rich in vegetables, legumes and fruits, and low in meat seem to work for you, physically and cognitively,” says Assoc Prof Dr Chin Ai-Vyrm, who spoke on *Food For Life* during the conference.

The Okinawa diet comprises green and yellow vegetables, sweet potato, tofu, legumes, fish and jasmine tea. Ikarians mainly consume goat’s milk, olive oil, herbal teas, vegetables and fruit.

Dr Chin also spoke on *hara hachi bi* – the Okinawan reminder to stop consuming food once their stomachs are 80% full.

“A 10%-40% reduction in calories has been shown to

increase lifespan in organisms like yeast, nematodes, flies and rats. Populations with long-lived individuals appear to have had some calorie restriction at some point in time (due to war or poverty),” says Dr Chin, who is attached to the geriatric division of Universiti Malaya Medical Centre.

“However, what is clear is that calorie restriction has not been proven to increase lifespan in humans. Results of experiments on rhesus monkeys have been mixed, with the most recent study showing no benefits for longevity.”

Based on the Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010 by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the

percentage of population aged 65 and above has increased to 5.1% compared with 3.9% in 2000.

“Life expectancy has been increasing over the years. The estimated number of people aged 100 and above will be between four and five million by 2050. Nearly 55,000 Japanese are over 100 years old and the number of centenarians in Japan has been steadily increasing for the last 43 years,” says Dr Chin.

He adds that clean water, better sanitation and improved healthcare are key elements which contribute to an increase in life expectancy.

Longevity is not about living longer, beyond the average life expectancy; it is also about living a life that is independent and free of major disabilities.