



# Prevention as a Lifestyle

The saying “prevention is better than cure” holds even more truth today when we are looking at co-existing with Covid-19. Prevention through a healthy lifestyle has never been more important.

**T**he close connection between preventing infectious disease and preventing chronic disease to reduce the chances of infections come in several prongs.

On the one hand, our government has pushed forth inoculation of vaccinations and instituted SOPs (standards of operations) such as mask-wearing in public, social distancing, control of or closure of crowd-inducing public areas with poor ventilation. On the other hand, we as individuals need to play our parts in making sure we are living a healthy lifestyle. This includes practices such as exercising, eating good nutrition, getting enough sleep, and others.

**Text** Chow Ee Tan **Images** Courtesy of Respective Interviews/Stockphoto

Unhealthy lifestyles ironically can manifest during lockdowns—overeating, being sedentary and lack of physical activity, elevated alcohol and tobacco use, and increased screen time are behaviours associated with non-communicable diseases. Therefore, it takes extra effort to make appropriate lifestyle changes. Good nutrition, regular exercise, adequate sleep, and cutting smoking and alcohol intake may help in preventing severe diseases.

Can such habits extend beyond vaccinations to a more holistic promotion of healthy lifestyle habits and healthy living environments? What will living with Covid-19 in the future look like? *Calibre* speaks to three healthcare practitioners for their views and advice on this pertinent topic.

#### CO-EXISTING WITH THE CORONAVIRUS

“The coronavirus will continue to be around. People will still be infected by the virus but it will be more like a seasonal flu,” says consultant physician, Dr Nick Chong. “Instead of using the word ‘prevention’, we should look into some ‘preventive measures’ that can help reduce the risk for us to be infected by the virus.”

He says it is important to know the risk factors. “It is important to understand what the virus is all about and the effects it has on people—this includes a holistic outlook—both physically and mentally,” he says, stressing that the only way to handle Covid-19 effectively is through our own immune system; that means to stay healthy and practise a healthy lifestyle, as well as having access to good healthcare.

“First, we should understand what the virus is all about and educate ourselves on the symptoms, and the



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effects it has on people,” he says.

“You should try to put yourself in a low-risk condition. For instance, avoid being in an environment with no circulation of air flow. The habits and lifestyles we choose are linked to our exposure to the virus,” continues Dr Chong.

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#### BOOSTING IMMUNE SYSTEMS THROUGH LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Dr Chong reminds us to consciously keep our immune system intact and functioning well, as our bodies can be conditioned so that our immune system is able to work at an optimal level.

“This means keeping our weight within your body mass index or BMI, eating healthily, getting adequate sleep, drinking lots of water, and not smoking or taking too much alcohol,” he says.



## ➤ Prevent



Dr Chong says Vitamin D has been overlooked and stresses its important functions.

“Vitamin D is obtained from sunlight. Many Malaysians have Vitamin D deficiency due to lack of exposure to sunlight. Vitamin D can help promote a healthier immune system and is known to be effective in the fight against Covid -19. This is especially important for the elderly,” he says.

Another important lifestyle booster is exercising regularly. Exercise trains the heart and promotes blood circulation; it also allows more oxygen to be transported to our muscles,” says Dr Chong.

He notes that physical health and mental health go hand-in-hand. The uncertainties of the virus and the ensuing isolations have caused depression and other forms of stress.

“It is not easy, but we can allow ourselves to open up and seek support and treatment. With more awareness, we hope people are more accepting that this is a real challenge,” he says.

Vaccination has an important role to play. When a population has a high vaccination rate, it allows the transition from pandemic to endemic.

“Hopefully in the transition to the endemic phase, the majority of the population would have better abilities to fight this virus and make infection less severe each time it happens. That is when herd immunity happens and

when our immune system develops the ability to combat the virus,” he says.

### THE PANDEMIC AND GOOD EATING HABITS

“Covid-19 has imposed a new set of challenges for the individual to maintain a healthy diet,” says Wendy Wong, a dietitian and general manager of Salad Atelier Malaysia.

“Self-isolation, lockdown, and social distancing are important measures to flatten the curve of the disease. But they have repercussions on one’s health, including changes in eating patterns, sleeping habits, and physical activity,” she states.

“We should start boosting our immunity from natural food intake and/or supplement form depending on our lifestyle and environment limitations. A balanced diet will guarantee a strong immune system that can help withstand any assault by the virus,” says Wendy.

She advises the public to consume adequate zinc, iron, and vitamins A, B12, B6, C, and E as they are essential for the maintenance of immune function. High antioxidant vitamins and minerals scavenge free radicals from the body cells and prevent or reduce the damage caused by oxidation.

“I believe this pandemic has taught us to be more health conscious as we know poor diet and lack of exercise might cause many preventable illnesses and death.”

"A healthy lifestyle is holistic and covers healthy eating habits, regular physical activity, a good sleep cycle, good social support, and a positive mindset. Let us start from practising healthy diet as the first step in preventing chronic diseases while preparing our body to fight the virus."

- WENDY WONG, DIETICIAN

### HEALTHY DIETARY CHOICES AS PREVENTIVE MEASURES

"When one practises healthy lifestyle during the pandemic, such as eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, enjoying more homecooked dishes with low sodium, reducing red meat intake, and increasing fibre intake, our food preference and dine out food options might also skew towards the healthier choices after lockdowns," she says.

She stresses we should only take supplements backed by scientific research and reliable sources. Consuming immune-boosting vitamins and minerals are encouraged, but we should also understand our body's need.

It is best to perform a comprehensive health screening before supplementation to avoid complications. Chronic stress can affect the body's use of calories and nutrients, raising the body's metabolic needs and increasing the use and excretion of many nutrients.

"If one does not eat a nutritious diet, a deficiency may occur. With chronic stress, elevated levels of cortisol may cause cravings, particularly for foods high in sugar, fat, and calories, which may then lead to weight gain," she says.

Comfort foods, like a bowl of warm oatmeal, boost levels of serotonin, a calming brain chemical. A healthy diet can help counter the impact of stress

by shoring up the immune system and controlling our blood pressure.

"Nutrition may not be the first line of treatment in many diseases, but patients with known chronic diseases most likely have poorer prognoses, as they take longer time to recover optimal health even with medications," she says.

In short, a proper and healthy diet can ensure a robust immune system that can resist any onslaught by the virus. Individuals consuming well-balanced diets appear to be healthier with better immune systems and lower incidence of chronic diseases and infections.

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mindset. Let us start from practising healthy diet as the first step in preventing chronic diseases while preparing our body to fight the virus," she says.

### COVID-19'S TOLL ON MENTAL HEALTH

It's an understatement to say that living through this challenging time with many sudden changes and



## ➤ Prevent

constant adjustments to routines and lifestyle can take heavy tolls on not just our physical but mental health.

“The health crisis of Covid-19 has a number of pandemic-related consequences that affect every aspect of our lives,” says Soh Yoke Wah, a therapist with KIN & KIDS, Marriage, Family and Child Therapy Centre. “The pandemic has caused us to experience situations that dramatically change how we conduct our daily lives. Some of us had to deal with personal traumas such as grief and loss of loved ones, personal health, social connections, or loss of job and income.”

She says it is important for us to acknowledge that our internal strength of resilience has helped us in navigating through all possible difficulties thrown at us, to adapt to this life-changing crisis, and to slowly find ways to bounce back.

“As an emotionally focused

therapist, I believe that emotions play an important and functional role in maintaining our psychological and physical wellbeing,” she says. “When we experience extreme stress and crises, our ability to self-soothe and self-regulate emotions may be impaired, resulting often in us entering into a state of defence called the ‘fight or flight’ responses.

“When such responses persist, it would put us at risk of a variety of physical and psychological illnesses, and it will also weaken our body’s immune system, making us more vulnerable to diseases such as Covid,” she says.

### RECOGNISING STRESSES AND RESPONSES

“Understanding the body’s natural fight or flight response is one of the important preventive measures that we can adopt as part of our lifestyle,” Soh says. “Recognising what happens to our body and mood when we are under stress will then help us find ways to deal directly with the stressors, or choose appropriate strategies in regulating our emotions and stress effectively.”

Soh says sometimes we may not be able to immediately find a solution in getting rid of the stressors in our lives.

In the case of Covid, there is still no way we could avoid all the negative impacts of the pandemic in our lives.

“But there are many good coping strategies to help us manage the stresses associated with Covid and to help us regain a sense of control and hope so that our body can be restored to a more stable and healthier state. The key is to have multiple strategies; some depend on ourselves to self-soothe and self-regulate, while others depend on friends or family to comfort and support us,” she says.

These strategies include meaningful deep breathing, meditations and prayers, music and art, reading and learning, enjoying nature, and being connected to loved ones among others.

### LEARNING FROM PAST AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCES

Soh says it is also equally important to take stock of the preventive measures that we have adopted for the past two years that can be helpful in helping our survival and future growth.

“The lockdowns had given us opportunities to slow down and recharge, to connect with ourselves and to re-evaluate priorities in life, to reconnect with loved ones, and to become more aware of the importance of physical and mental health,” she says. “All these gradually help us develop new skills that give us a better sense of purpose. Also, to realise the importance of showing empathy for others and lending helping hands to them.”

“We can’t predict our future, but we can influence our future to some extent by making right choices in the here and now. If we focus on doing what is within our control now, this would help us remain positive and not take anything for granted,” she says. ☺



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