

# Making the right choices in life

Experts share tips on ways to improve health



DESPITE the rising trend towards healthy eating and fitness fixes, the health of Malaysians are still rated well below under par.

Nearly 70% of adults felt their health was not as good as it was five years ago, with 61% age 30 and below feeling the same way even though they are supposed to be in the prime of their health.

As a result, Malaysia scored a mere 63 points out of 100 in the 2016 Healthy Living Index by AIA Group, ranking eighth in the list while China takes the lead with 72 points, followed by Macau (70) and Vietnam (67).

A total of 751 Malaysians participated in this third wave survey that was conducted with over 10,000 adults across 15 countries in Asia Pacific.

The Healthy Living Index score for Malaysia has been consistent from previous surveys, indicating that health among Malaysians has not improved.

AIA Bhd chief marketing officer Thomas Wong said the lack of improvement in Malaysia's Healthy Living Index score was a big concern.

"The survey results help us gauge Malaysians' self-awareness because understanding how they think and act when it comes to their health is a vital first step towards identifying solutions.

"We at AIA want to play an active role in empowering Malaysians to make sustained changes to their lifestyles on a daily basis so we can become a healthier nation," Wong pointed out.

Respondents recognise the need for healthy living, with 60% believing in having sufficient sleep, 57% in eating healthy foods, 56% in having a clean environment as well as a positive mindset and 55% in reducing stress.

Malaysians seem to be getting only 6.3 hours of sleep compared to 7.5 hours of sleep a night, making it the lowest among the 15 countries surveyed.

About 69% claimed they exercise regularly, spending an average of 2.6 hours a week, which is lower than the minimum 3.5 hours a week recommended by fitness experts.

Barriers that are preventing them from getting enough sleep and exercise are the Internet and smartphone usage, with 68% reporting they are addicted to online activities, spending an average of 4.1 hours a day on non-work related pursuits.

Also hampering their efforts to lose weight and live healthy is the unhealthy eating habits with 86% admitting that they eat in front of their screens, 81% snacking unhealthily and 73% having late dinners.

Poor eating habits were cited as one of the reasons for obesity, with six out of 10 Malaysians hoping to lose an average of 8.5kg.

More than half of the participants were either pre-obese or obese following their Body Mass Index (BMI) readings.

Unhealthy habits are also steadily taking place among the young ones, because 17% of Malaysian parents wanted their children to lose at least 4.5kg.

Respondents admit that they can definitely do more to improve their health, welcoming guidance, ideas and motivation on how to change their lifestyle habits and sustaining healthy behaviours.

Besides presenting the survey results, AIA Bhd also held roundtable discussions where Intuit Research director Thomas Isaac, Indra Balaratnam Nutrition consultant dietitian Indra Balaratnam and Fitness First Asia Learning and Development head Jacqueline Wong shared on how goals can be achievable.

Isaac stressed the importance of setting goals because if people did not do so, chances are they were not going to do it.

"Goals must also be realistic because problems start when we set goals that don't work. And it's all in the mind.

"Taking small steps is key but people think small steps isn't good enough.

"They need to be reminded that changes begin with small steps," he said.

Indra agreed that people should make their own goals, instead of letting other people make for them.

"People get too carried away making ambitious goals, but is it what they really want to achieve?

"Are they ready to work on those changes? It has to come from within and what you really want.

"Small steps are also crucial. If you want to cut down on sugar, cut back by a teaspoon first.

“But if you stop sugar totally and abruptly, you won’t be able to continue drinking sugarless drinks and will eventually fall back into having sugar again because it’s not realistic,” added Indra.

Wong also strongly believes that simple steps can lead to changes.

“If you don’t feel like working out, it’s okay. Just get dressed, get on the treadmill and move for 15 minutes. Chances are you will want to increase it after that.

“But if you get someone to immediately workout for 30 minutes, it may seem daunting.

“For a start, you can do things that make up 30 minutes like walk up the stairs for two minutes, then get up and dance for another five minutes and so on.

“Goals must also be sustainable, because how can they be if someone who has never

run before starts running every day?

“Start by walking for 10 minutes a day, and gradually increase the pace until you are comfortable to run,” she encouraged.

To make a healthy change, Wong advised them to find something that they were good at or enjoy doing.

“Then make sure you have full autonomy when you work on it, not people telling you how to do it or when you should do it.

“Lastly, find friends whom you will enjoy doing it with because they too can motivate you.

“Don’t make the change tomorrow, but make it now,” she concluded.

The roundtable discussion was facilitated by AIA Health Services Sdn Bhd Care Management head and medical director Dr Myralini S. Theasan.



(From left) Thomas, Indra, Wong, Dr Myralini and Wong were part of the discussion.



Thomas (left) sharing some tips with the audience at the Health Perspectives: A Reality Check event. — Photos: ROHAIZAT MD DARUS/The Star