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The chronic killers

Lifestyle changes and health programmes can help fight major illnesses

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SINGAPORE – Ministry of Health (MOH) statistics tell a sobering tale about the general state of Singaporeans' health. According to the Singapore Burden of Disease Study 2010, approximately one in four adult Singaporeans (23.5 per cent) had hypertension, one in six (17.4 per cent) had high total cholesterol and one in 10 (11.3 per cent) had diabetes.

According to the World Health Organization, deaths from chronic disease are set to soar with rates rising by 17 per cent over the next decade.

Doctors and researchers agree that the rising rates of hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes are due to our increasingly sedentary and unhealthy lifestyles. What this means is that the risk of contracting these diseases can be reduced if people ate less and adopted more active lifestyles.

TOO LITTLE EXERCISE, TOO MUCH FOOD

The root of the problem is that many Singaporeans exercise too little and eat too much. The National Health Survey 2010 found that 54 per cent of Singaporean residents aged 18 to 69 did not participate in any leisure-time physical activity.

Dr Kwong Seh Meng, Deputy Head of Medical Operations at the Fullerton Healthcare Group, said: "As the population ages, we become less active in general and burn less energy but we are still used to eating the same amount."

While these conditions on their own may not be fatal, they increase the risk of developing chronic disease. Hypertension, which is more commonly known as high blood pressure, and high cholesterol are both risk factors for developing heart disease and stroke.

THE OBESITY ISSUE

Another condition that's cause for concern is the rising obesity rates. The National Health Survey 2010 found that one in 10 Singaporeans were considered obese — more than double the number in 1992. Obesity is linked to an increased risk of developing the Big Three
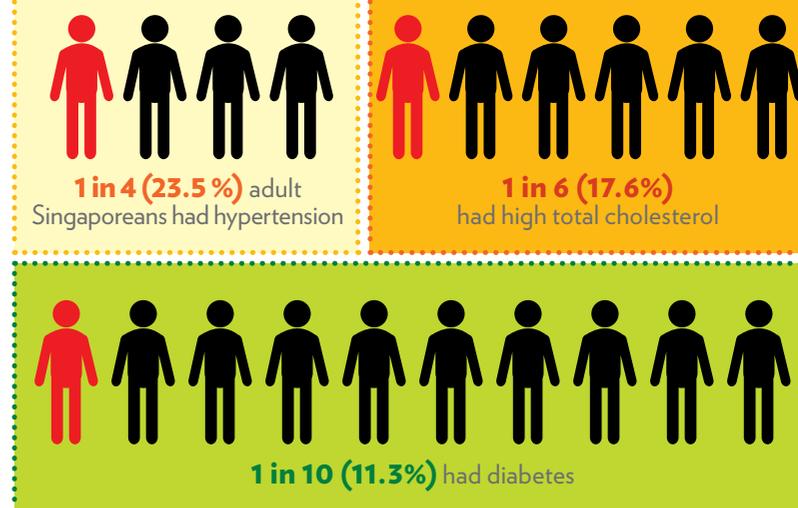
disorders, as well as arthritis and even some types of cancers.

While the cause of obesity is often thought to be just eating too much and exercising too little, the reality is quite a bit more complex. Scientists have found that numerous other factors may play a role — gut bacteria, genes and even environmental conditions may also contribute to rising obesity levels.

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

If the incidence rates of hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes and obesity continue to rise, this, and Singapore's greying population, could increase healthcare costs.

"Costs of healthcare will rise as a result. If the conditions are well controlled at the primary level, cost of treatment of disease complications will be reduced overall. Poor control at a population level will see increased downstream costs," Dr Kwong said.

"As more people live longer but with more noncommunicable diseases, the average expenditure for healthcare will rise for the elderly."

PREVENTION IS THE KEY

The good news, says the Health Promotion Board (HPB), is that while chronic diseases are the most common and costly health problems, they are also among the most preventable.

A few simple lifestyle tweaks can reduce the risk of developing these chronic diseases — just eat a little less, and be a little more active. The Health Promotion Board recommends the average adult Singaporean gets 150 minutes of physical activity a week. It doesn't have to be difficult — for example,

25 minutes of brisk walking a day is all that is needed. Take the stairs instead of the lift, or alight one bus stop earlier than usual.

A moderately active male should only consume 2,590 calories a day (and 2,035 calories if you are a female). Ways to eat more healthily include eating more fruit and vegetables (juice doesn't count), opting for whole grains instead of processed carbohydrates, and watching portion size.

But a multi-faceted approach is what's needed, argues Dr Kwong. Not only will it involve people adopting a more active lifestyle, what is needed is a focus on the early detection of disease, as well as timely and effective treatments of each disease to prevent complications.

A HELPING HAND

Here's where the Government has stepped in. Through the MOH and HPB, numerous schemes have been established to encourage Singaporeans to make healthier choices. For example, there's the Healthy Living Master Plan, which hopes to provide Singapore with greater access to healthy options, and the Healthier Choice symbol, which makes healthier grocery shopping easy.

The HPB has also established the Nurse Educator Programme, which sees trained nurses help individuals with chronic disease to understand and manage their conditions, through various talks and workshops within the community.

There is also the Medisave for Chronic Disease Management Programme, which allows patients to use their Medisave to pay for part of their outpatient treatment for certain chronic diseases.

Singapore Burden of Disease Study 2010

1 in 4 (23.5 %) adult Singaporeans had hypertension

1 in 6 (17.6%) had high total cholesterol

1 in 10 (11.3%) had diabetes

GRAPHIC: CINDY CHAN   SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HEALTH