

Healthy nutrition, healthy families

By Dr TEE E SIONG

OVER the past 10 years, Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) has strived to promote greater awareness on healthy eating and active living by disseminating unbiased and practical nutrition information to Malaysians, in line with the Government's healthy lifestyle programme.

NMM is an ideal complement to the Health Ministry's efforts in preventing chronic diet-related diseases such as obesity, heart diseases and diabetes.

A decade of valuable experience with NMM has shown that this strategic alliance among three non-profit professional organisations, the private sector and relevant government departments and agencies is viable. It demonstrates that through this partnership, we can pool resources and work together to empower the people with appropriate health and nutrition knowledge.

For me personally, it has been a valuable and rewarding experience. I still recall vividly when I first made the proposal to the then Health Minister to initiate NMM in 2002. Ten years later, I can now look back with pride to see how NMM has grown from strength to strength.

I do believe NMM can become a viable collaborative programme to reach out to all Malaysians. However, it requires greater commitment and support from more corporate companies and various government departments and agencies.

NMM 2012 has taken on the theme "Let's Create Healthier Families" to highlight the importance of adopting healthy eating and active lifestyles amongst all family members. Amidst the rising trend of diet-related chronic diseases (non-communicable diseases, NCDs) in the country, NMM calls on all families to take serious actions to arrest these increases.

A strategic alliance

Initiated in 2002, NMM has been observed in the month of April for the past 10 years. The objective of NMM is to promote greater awareness and the practice of healthy eating and active living, to reinforce the Government's healthy lifestyle programme.

The NMM programme is a collaborative effort among the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA), and Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO).

The programme also has the support of the Health Ministry, particularly the Nutrition Division. Other ministries and agencies are also collaborating in this programme, especially the Education Ministry and the National Population and Family Development Board (LPFKN).

Annually, a number of activi-

Families must work together towards eating healthily and living actively.

ties have been carried out during NMM, using a variety of approaches and media, to disseminate messages on healthy eating and active living. Activities include publishing educational materials such as guidebooks and educational articles; seminars and workshops; and roadshows and exhibitions at the community level. Nutritionists of the state health departments carry out similar activities throughout the country.

Since 2008, more NMM activities have been carried out. These have been made possible by the support of various corporate sponsors. This enables more educational activities to be carried out, benefitting more members of the public.

This model of a strategic alliance among the professional bodies, government ministries and agencies, and the corporate sector, has enabled the sharing and pooling of resources for the execution of a wide variety of activities for the benefit of the people. It is this partnership of the main stakeholders that enables us to implement activities for NMM 2012.

I invite all readers, wherever you are, to participate in whatever way you can in the various NMM activities.

NutriFun Land Carnival

Let me start with NutriFun Land Carnival, one of the main attractions of NMM 2012. To be held next Saturday and Sunday (April 14-15) at the Mid Valley Exhibition Centre, Kuala Lumpur, the Health Minister is expected to officially launch the Carnival, and also join us in celebrating our 10th anniversary.

This carnival aims to guide Malaysians in using the holistic approach to wellness. We encourage whole families to cultivate good eating habits, as well as incorporating physical activity as a vital aspect of good health.

The NutriFun Land Carnival is full of educational, fun-filled and interactive games and activities that are not only for children, but also cater to adults. You can gain more insights into the food pyramid, learn what ingredients make up a meal, understand the differences in key nutrients between food choices, understand how to use food labels more effectively, and learn how to incorporate physical activities into daily lives.

Our two-day carnival also features more "serious" activities. We provide free nutrition checks, including body mass index (BMI) and body fat percentage checks; blood pressure, blood glucose, and blood cholesterol tests; as well as nutrition and dietary advice by nutritionists and dietitians. We will also be disseminating NMM 2012 educational publications during the carnival.

Don't miss out on this great opportunity; have fun as a whole

family and learn everything you need to know about nutrition at the same time!

Educational materials

For those who are not able to participate in the carnival, a number of educational materials and media-related activities are available. In addition to distribution through various channels, these publications will be made available for downloading from the NSM website, www.nutriweb.org.my.

I would really urge all readers to read these booklets and educational articles. Special attention and care have been given to ensure that the information provided is relevant and appropriate for local readers.

Two key booklets have been published to provide information to families. The first is a booklet entitled *Family Nutrition Matters: Experts' Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*. This Q&A book covers 20 frequently asked questions about nutrition matters for family members of all ages. It aims to clarify any doubts and concerns about a variety of nutrition topics. The answers provided are unbiased and are presented in a simple format for better understanding.

Topics covered include choosing nutritious snacks for children; advising teenage girls on coping with nutrient needs during monthly periods; how to manage blood cholesterol levels through dietary approaches; clarification on fats and oils; issues related to weight management; and tips on appropriate physical activities to be incorporated into daily lives.

A mini-booklet for parents, *Tips Gaya Hidup Sihat*, has also been published. It contains clarifications on seven key nutrition topics. These include a summary of the 14 key messages of the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines; being overweight and obesity, and the determination of BMI; how to achieve balance, moderation and variety in daily diets; healthy eating when dining out; preparing healthier meals at home; making effective use of food and nutrition labels; and ways to increase daily physical activities.

A series of educational articles will be published this month and a few months beyond that. There will also be experts' interviews in major TV programmes and radio shows. A wide range of topics will be covered, especially contemporary food and nutrition issues, including how nutrition plays a key role in the causation of diet-related chronic diseases, childhood obesity, making healthier choices when eating out, and encouraging increased physical activity.

Outreach activities

Various other outreach activities have also been planned for this year, targeting both children and



One of the publications in conjunction with Nutrition Month Malaysia 2012.

parents. One of these activities is a series of fun educational roadshows, called NutriFun Roadshows, which will be conducted in selected primary schools in the Klang Valley and other states.

These roadshows will feature fun and interactive educational activities on the food pyramid, making healthier choices, as well as physical activity.

Nutrition Combo Kits, which contain educational materials for both parents and children, will be distributed during these roadshows. A NMM mascot and "nutri-cruiser" will make their appearance in these roadshows to enhance interaction with the children.

Several nutrition interactive club sessions will be organised. These are fun, educational and live interactive activities after school hours, in collaboration with Kelab Doktor Muda.

The Health Ministry (through state nutritionists) has also planned its own Nutrition Month Malaysia activities in other states throughout the country. There will be nutrition school roadshows, exhibitions and talks during which publications for the nutrition month will be distributed.

Families - it's time to act

In this modern fast-paced society, we are faced with hectic schedules and juggle multiple responsibilities. Both parents have to take on day jobs, and are therefore, tied up with office work. In addition, they may be busy sending their children to daycare, kindergarten or school and fetching them back.

Children also have hectic schedules, with school, homework, tuition, or perhaps extracurricular activities. This frequently leaves many families with little time to prepare healthy home-cooked meals. It is now more common to eat out, or even eat on the go. We prefer convenience foods, and also depend heavily on take-out meals.

Good nutrition and regular

exercise have therefore taken a backseat in our busy lives. In addition, families are faced with high levels of stress and have to struggle to maintain a proper work-life balance.

This has taken a heavy toll on the health of Malaysians. Chronic lifestyle diseases, such as being overweight and obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancers have been on the rise over the past few decades as a result of these dramatic changes in the lifestyles of Malaysians.

Families must realise that these diseases can attack anyone in the family. Families must take immediate action to prevent this from happening. This can only be achieved by adopting healthier lifestyles. It is never too early or too late to adopt healthy nutrition.

Start by breastfeeding your babies, and continue to provide nutritious balanced meals to young children, teenagers, pregnant and lactating women, adults and the elderly.

Healthy eating and active living is certainly possible even with packed schedules and a challenging work-life balance.

"No time" should never be an excuse. It is a matter of making a serious effort and a sustained commitment by all family members to adopt a healthier way ahead. Put into practice what you already know. Learn more; sieve out misleading information and semi truths about food and nutrition.

Families must act now.

■ Dr Tee E Siong pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. Visit the Nutrition Month Malaysia 2012 NutriFun Land Carnival on April 14 & 15, 2012 (from 10 am - 9 pm) at Mid Valley Exhibition Centre (Hall 2). Come and meet the country's nutritionists and dietitians to learn more about making healthier food choices and an active lifestyle. Lots of fun-educational activities and goodies will be waiting for you! For more information, visit nutriweb.org.my