

Vaccination is not just for kids. Take steps to get protected. PICTURE: TIRACHARDZ - FREEPIK.COM

# Health habits to adopt this year



IT'S a long-standing joke that New Year's resolutions are meant to be broken, but when the promise is tied to health, the joke's on you.

Failing to live up to a health resolution may just mean you won't be around to make another one next year.

Health should always be a priority, and Covid-19 taught us that it should never be taken for granted.

In 2023, there are many changes we can make for our health and well-being. Here are some of them:

## GET ENOUGH SLEEP

The lack of good-quality sleep and its impact on health are well documented.

Dr Sasikala Amirthalingam, an IMU Healthcare family medicine physician, says sleep deprivation is linked to a variety of chronic health issues, including heart disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, obesity and depression.

In 2018, a survey by Am Life International Sdn Bhd indicated that nine in 10 Malaysians are affected by either one or more sleep problems.

Moderate exercise and a healthy diet can improve sleep quality and help you sleep longer at night.

Investing in good sleep is as important for overall health as diet and exercise, whether it's creating a sleep-friendly environment at home, purchasing high-quality bedding or seeking medical attention for sleep problems.

## EAT NUTRIENT-DENSE FOOD

We often fill our plates with what we like and not what our bodies need.

The right approach to eating is a lesson best learned early, but it's never too late to start.

IMU Healthcare dietitian Siti Nurhana Abd Wahid says nutrient-dense foods are common, everyday foods that are easy to find in local markets and rich in vitamins, miner-



Be proactive. Go for a health screening. PICTURE BY FREEPIK

als, and other nutrients.

These include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, and lean meat and poultry, preferably prepared with little or no added solid fats, sugars or sodium.

Optimising nutrient density is done by shifting typical food and beverage choices (items high in solid fats, added sugars or sodium) to a variety of more nutrient-dense foods in appropriate portion sizes to improve overall health.

Make each meal count by ensuring you have an array of nutrient-dense foods on your plate instead of those high in calories but low on nutrients such as sugary snacks or processed food.

## EXERCISE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

The pandemic has unleashed the mental health epidemic that experts predicted it would.

The Malaysian Mental Health Association recorded a two-fold increase in people seeking help related to stress throughout 2020 compared with 2019.

World Health Organisation data also notes that in the first year of the pandemic, the global rate of anxiety and depression saw a substantial increase, adding to the nearly one billion people already living with a mental disorder.

Dr Sasikala says exercise plays a role here.

Being active improves one's mood, reduces stress and increases one's ability to cope with stress.

A recent study done by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, found that running for 15 minutes a day or walking for an hour reduces the risk of major depression by 26 per cent.

But for those already deep in depression or struggling with suicidal thoughts it's important to disregard stigma and take the step towards getting medical care, which includes therapy and medication and access to appropriate support groups.

## GET YOURSELF SCREENED AND VACCINATED

Malaysians generally take a "wait and see" approach when it comes to health. This leads to low health screening rates.

KPJ Johor Specialist Hospital occupational health doctor Dr Muhammad Yazid Abd Manaf says health screening will enable problems to be detected in advance and for preventive measures to be taken or treatment options to be recommended.



Choose nutrient-dense foods rather than those which just fill the tummy with high calories. PICTURE BY FREEPIK



An annual health screening programme could also identify those who need urgent or periodic vaccination.

Vaccination is not just for children, as many Malaysians assume. Adult vaccination is equally important, especially for the elderly, whose immune system is not as strong as it used to be.

Adult vaccinations include those for conditions such as influenza, pneumonia and hepatitis.

## KNOW FAMILY HISTORY

Understanding one's family history is also an important component of good health. Knowing whether one

has a history of diabetes, high cholesterol in the family or the risk of certain inherited cancers means we can either take steps to reduce these risks, such as lifestyle changes, or be better prepared to face them should these ailments strike.

Go for genetic testing, too, if there is a need for it. Many health conditions, such as cystic fibrosis and sickle cell disease, are genetic disorders, and in some cases, we may be carriers of a disease without being aware of it and inadvertently pass it to our children.

View genetic testing as a step towards protecting your personal wellbeing and ensuring long term good health.



The importance of sleep is often overlooked. PICTURE BY JCOMP - FREEPIK