

IT'S the time of the year, the New Year. As the calendar resets, we often set new goals to improve ourselves, for example, to eat healthily and exercise for better health. However, new diet and exercise goals usually fail – whether due to lack of discipline or motivation or simply because they don't truly resonate with us.

What if there is a simpler and sustainable way to practise healthy eating and active living, i.e. Healthy nutrition? Would you give it a try? Practising healthy nutrition for better health is not a particular diet but a lifestyle change. It only works if you genuinely want the change, take action to make it happen and turn it into a habit. Only then does it become a sustainable lifelong lifestyle change.

Here are five healthy nutrition tips, which I recommend as a nutritionist:

Make sure there are vegetables in your daily meals

According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) of Malaysia 2024, only 12% of Malaysian adults and 5% of Malaysian adolescents consume the recommended intake of three daily servings of vegetables. Hence, Malaysians are not consuming enough vegetables. Vegetables are superfoods that are low in calories, rich in dietary fibre, vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients and antioxidants for our body's needs. They promote healthy bowel movement and help prevent constipation. If you are not a vegetable eater, start slow with your favourite vegetable. Try carrot or tomato (take note that potato is not a vegetable) because leafy green vegetables are usually not everyone's favourite. It takes time to adapt to the taste, so be patient. After that, increase the amount and try a different vegetable. Eat at least two different coloured vegetables (e.g. leafy greens and carrots) at each meal, for a total of three servings daily.

Practise the Malaysian Healthy Plate

Malaysian Healthy Plate: Quarter–Quarter–Half is a simple guide to estimate portion sizes for the main food groups at each meal. Each food group serves a specific function for our body's health. Carbohydrates, namely rice, cereals, grains and tubers, which provide the main energy for our body, should comprise a quarter of our plate at meals. The other quarter will be our protein foods, such as legumes, seeds and nuts (plant-based protein) or eggs,



Five healthy nutrition tips for the new year

BY DR ROSELINE YAP

poultry, fish and meat (animal-based protein). Protein is important for the growth and repair of our bodies. The remaining half of the plate should be filled with vegetables and fruit, which are important for our body's immune system because they are rich in vitamins and minerals. Lastly, remember to have a glass of plain water with your meals.

Exercise most days of the week

When there is energy input via eating (calories in), there should be energy output (calories out). This is important to maintain a healthy body weight. NHMS 2024 showed that one in two Malaysian adults is overweight or obese and Malaysian children and adolescents are also catching up with the unhealthy trend.

Physical inactivity is one of the leading causes. There are numerous health benefits of physical activity and exercise. Regular exercise helps improve blood circulation and overall body composition by increasing muscle mass, strengthening bones and decreasing body fat. Exercise also benefits mental health by releasing endorphins, which make you happy and reduce your stress. So, work on being active most days of the week, start with five to 10 minutes of your favourite sport or exercise and gradually increase to 30 minutes to an hour each time. The World Health Organization recommends at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week for adults.

Daily foods for your gut health

People often neglect or are unaware of the importance of gut health. In fact, our gut is connected to several major organs of the body (for example, the brain), therefore playing important roles in digestion and nutrient absorption, as well as supporting immunity and mental health. Probiotics are beneficial bacteria that help promote a healthy gut. Examples of foods which contain probiotics include cultured milk beverages and fermented foods such as yoghurt, *tempeh* and *kimchi*. Prebiotics, on the other hand, are fibre-rich foods, namely vegetables, fruit, legumes and whole grains. Prebiotics serve as food for the beneficial bacteria in our gut;

examples of prebiotic-rich foods include bananas, apples, asparagus, garlic, beans and oats. Hence, consume a variety of both probiotics and prebiotics-rich foods daily for a healthy gut.

Reduce S.O.S (sugar–oil–salt)

Overconsumption of sugar, fats, oils and salt in foods and beverages can lead to chronic lifestyle diseases and conditions such as coronary heart disease, diabetes mellitus, obesity and some cancers. The prevalence of such chronic lifestyle diseases in Malaysia increases each year and this unhealthy diet of high sugar, fats and oils and salt is one of the risk factors. So, how can we change this? Cook more meals at home and explore natural herbs and spices. Cooking at home enables you to use healthier cooking methods (for example, steaming, grilling, or baking) and also helps you control the amount of sugar, fat, oil, and salt used in your meals. Do check out simple, healthier recipes in the free online recipe books available on the Nutrition Society of Malaysia's website.

The above five healthy nutrition tips may seem overwhelming at first. Start by choosing one you can practice and stick with. Once it becomes a habit, move to the next tip and repeat. The key point here is to make a start, gradually increase the pace and transform it into a habit. This New Year, don't just go on a diet; upgrade your lifestyle and your body will thank you for it. Let's strive to eat healthily and exercise regularly for better health.

Dr Roseline Yap is the honorary treasurer of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) and a nutrition consultant. NSM is a non-profit professional organisation, with one of its core objectives being to promote healthy eating and active living among all Malaysians. NSM is committed to providing the public with free access to practical nutrition information (www.nutriweb.org.my). The content and views expressed in this article are solely based on the author's professional expertise.



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