



Teen food

Encouraging healthy eating in adolescents.

MANY years of health education campaigns by the government and professional bodies have successfully created a respectable level of awareness among the public about the importance of good nutrition.

However, we should not be satisfied with such successes. Diet-related chronic diseases are still prevalent, and rising to an alarming level, and remain a huge challenge; there is still insufficient understanding of the role of nutrition in the causation and prevention of nutritional disorders.

Stemming from the realisation that there is indeed a need for continuous efforts to provide more unbiased nutrition information to the public, Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) was initiated in 2002 and inaugurated on April 13, 2002. Henceforth, NMM has been observed in the month of April in the country for the past five years.

Nutrition Month Malaysia to promote increased awareness

The NMM project is a collaborative effort between fellow professional bodies, namely the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA), and the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO). The project also has the support of the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH), particularly the Family Health Development Division.

The objective of NMM is to promote greater awareness and the practice of healthy eating, in line with the Government's healthy lifestyle programme. During NMM, a number of activities are carried out, using a variety of approaches, to further raise the visibility of nutrition.

It is envisaged that the increase in activities throughout the country during NMM will be able to further raise public awareness on the importance of healthy eating in maintaining health and wellbeing.

Different themes are selected for each NMM. The topics given focus over the years are:

- 2002: Building healthy families
- 2003: Healthy eating, healthy life
- 2004: Eat right, work well
- 2005: Youth & nutrition: future of the nation
- 2006: Women & nutrition
- For the year 2007, the theme selected is: Adolescents & nutrition

Why focus on adolescent nutrition?

I can think of at least three good reasons. Firstly, adolescence is a period of rapid growth and hence nutrient needs are at their greatest. When one compares the nutritional needs (recommended nutrient intake - RNI) of teenagers with children and adults (except for pregnant women), energy needs and the requirements for protein, calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin B1, B2, niacin, folate, and vitamins A and E are the



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highest for this age group.

It is, therefore, important to ensure that these nutrient needs are met so as not to lead to nutrient deficiencies, which in turn may hamper growth, health and academic performance.

Secondly, findings from selected studies in different parts of the country over the years have indicated that significant proportions of adolescents are affected by nutritional disorders.

Iron deficiency anaemia may affect some 20% of teenagers in rural communities and as much as 50% in poorer groups. About 20% of teenagers in selected inland areas could be affected by iodine deficiency. Dietary intake studies have indicated that calcium deficiency could be a widespread problem. We do not have much data regarding possible deficiency of other vitamins and minerals among adolescents.

On the other hand, findings have indicated that as much as 20% of the urban and 16% of rural teenagers may be overweight. It is well known that more overweight children tend to have risk factors for heart disease, e.g. high blood pressure, blood cholesterol and insulin. Diabetes is now striking younger age groups and becoming more common among teenagers.

Thirdly, studies have shown that eating habits among teenagers are generally poor. Large proportions of teenagers skip meals, especially breakfast and lunch. Some 25% have been found to be prone to eating disorders.

Poor dietary patterns may result from a variety of causes, including lack of nutrition knowledge, nutrition misinformation from various sources, lack of parental or teacher guidance, as well as limited food choices in school canteens. Or it may be because of a total lack of concern among teenagers on healthy eating.

Prevention of nutrient deficiencies as well as diet-related chronic diseases must therefore start from adolescence. The perception that diabetes and heart disease only develop much later in adulthood is

wrong. In fact, cholesterol build-up in the blood vessel, which leads to increased risk of heart disease, may start from childhood.

Promoting good nutritional understanding and appropriate eating habits must therefore be carried out among adolescents. Poor eating habits, resulting in imbalanced nutrient intakes must be corrected among teenagers.

Schools can help promote right nutrition for adolescents

As in previous years, a number of approaches have been undertaken to promote NMM activities, including a seminar to highlight the NMM theme to school authorities, articles in newspapers and magazines, radio and TV shows, as well as talks and exhibitions at the state level.

To kick off the NMM activities for 2007, a seminar was organised on March 31 focusing on this theme. Senior school staff, including those involved in student affairs, were invited to attend a series of four talks by nutritionists and dietitians.

The first talk presented the participants with this problem: the eating habits and nutritional status of Malaysian teenagers. It was followed by a talk on the nutritional needs of adolescents and the benefits of good nutrition. The third presentation explained how to detect nutritional problems and assess nutritional status of teenagers. The last speaker provided several recommendations for promoting healthy eating in schools.

It is hoped that teachers who participated in the seminar could serve as agents of change, passing on the knowledge gained to other teachers as well as children in their schools. It is anticipated that these teachers can be motivated to place greater emphasis on adolescent nutrition and promote healthy eating in their schools.

Unfortunately, attendance at the seminar was less than satisfactory. I was very disappointed that only less than half of the invited school staff was able to make it to the

seminar. It is hoped that similar seminars can be held in other states to enable teachers in other states to benefit from these messages and thereafter, be motivated to act on the recommendations.

Parents urged to help teens to eat right

Parents need to pay greater attention to the dietary patterns of their teenage children. Parents play an important role in guiding their teenage children towards healthier eating habits. In order to do so, parents themselves need to set good examples; they should be good role models.

I know it is not easy to talk to teenagers about healthy eating. Parents should not be dictating what these children should eat. What parents can do is to explain to them and continuously motivate them.

I will not provide details on this as Nutrition Month Malaysia Steering Committee shall be publishing a full article on this in *The Star* in the next few days. It is hoped that parents will take heed of this article and be motivated to help their teens eat right.

Ensuring the success of Nutrition Month Malaysia

Launching activities for NMM at the national level alone is definitely insufficient to achieve the desired effects. A few articles in the press, a few radio and TV shows or even a seminar are not going to yield great impact.

National level activities must be reflected in similar activities in all states in the country. The cooperation of all state nutritionists is necessary to effectively disseminate the intended messages to the community.

The success of NMM activities requires the cooperation of all. NMM activities are only for the period of a month. They are only intended to further raise the profile of nutrition among the community. Health and nutrition workers need

to build on the activities of nutrition month and continue to promote positive nutrition messages.

I do hope the public will take heed of the messages and activities. I do hope these activities will further help to promote healthy eating in the country.

After having chaired the Nutrition Month Malaysia Steering Committee for five years, I realise much more remains to be done to achieve the intended goals of the project. I believe it is a worthy project to continue to pursue. I do believe there are segments of the community who benefit from these activities.

It is important to push on with the project and work towards improving the overall programme and coverage.

**The prime messages of the 2007 Nutrition Month Malaysia with focus on adolescent nutrition can be viewed on the Nutrition Society of Malaysia website, www.nutriweb.org.my. There is a section in this website on nutrition for teenagers, aptly named NutriTeen. Also look out for other healthy eating information for you and your family on this website.*

■ NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my.

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