



For our children

Nutrition Month Malaysia 2009 helps caring parents nourish their children.

OUR children are our future. As caring parents, you shower your children with love and attention, and nourish and nurture them, especially when they are in their formative years.

There is only a small window of opportunity open to you during this period of formative years to start feeding your child right. Nutrient needs are high during this time of rapid growth and development and must be provided.

In addition, habits are formed during the early years; do not wait until your children have developed unhealthy eating habits. You cannot afford to wait because children grow very rapidly. Very soon, you will find that your children have grown up and you have lost that opportunity.

As caring parents, read on and see how Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2009 can help you provide proper nourishment to your children.

NMM helps promote healthy Malaysians

Initiated in 2002, Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) has been observed in the month of April for the past six years. The NMM project is a collaborative effort among fellow professional bodies, namely the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA), and Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO). The project also has the support of the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH), particularly the Nutrition Division.

The objective of NMM is to promote greater awareness of and the practice of healthy eating, in line with the government's healthy lifestyle programme.

There is a need to continue to empower the people with healthy eating knowledge. There is a need for continuous efforts to provide unbiased nutrition information to the public. There is therefore a need for Nutrition Month Malaysia to continue; and grow and reach out to all corners of the country, all segments of the population.

Different themes have been selected for each NMM. The topics given focus over the years were:

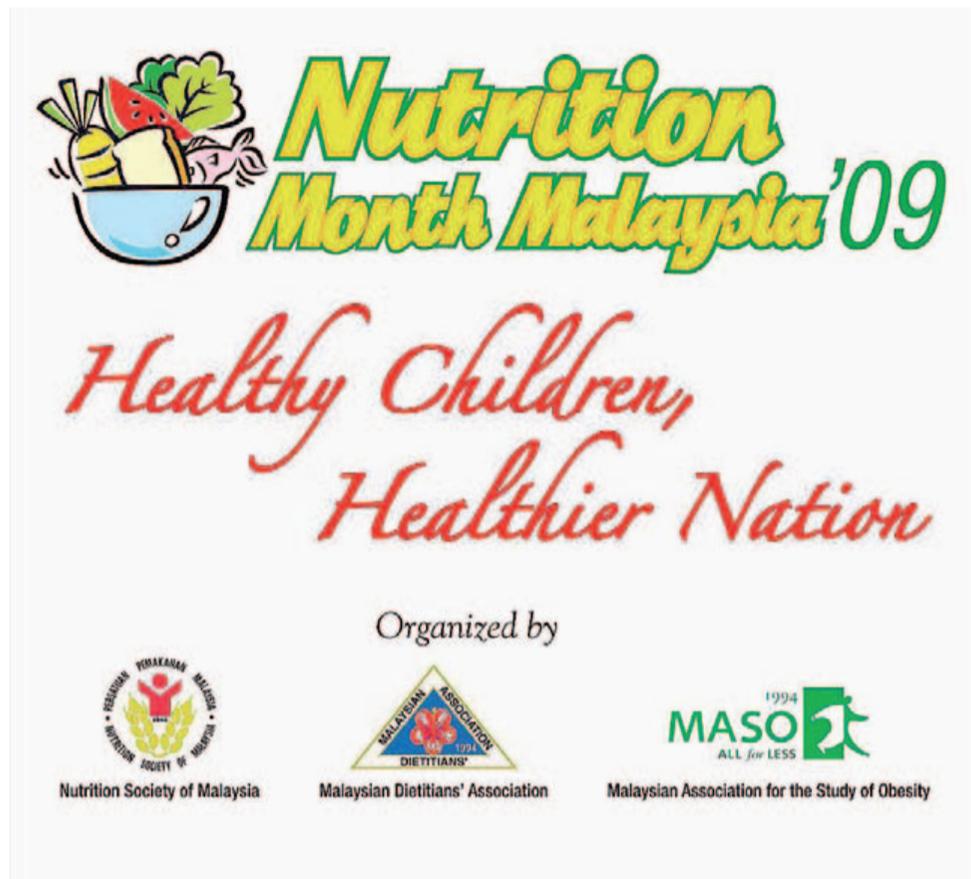
- 2002: Building healthy families
- 2003: Healthy eating, healthy life
- 2004: Eat right, work well
- 2005: Youth & nutrition: future of the nation
- 2006: Women & nutrition
- 2007: Adolescents & nutrition
- 2008: Eat right, enjoy life

Over the years, a number of activities have been carried out during NMM, using a variety of approaches and media, to further raise the visibility of nutrition. A few educational articles were published in major newspapers and magazines and seminars were organised for specific target groups identified in the theme for the year. Roadshows and exhibitions were sometimes carried out. It is certainly not sufficient just to have a few booklets published and a dozen articles in the press and magazines. We need to disseminate the information to the people. We need nutritionists, dietitians, and other health professionals to help promote the messages of NMM, to promote healthy eating. We need the media to help us disseminate these messages widely.

Nutritional problems amongst Malaysian children

In my previous *NutriScene* write-up, I had summarised the findings on the nutritional status of children from a nationwide survey in the country. The study, carried out in 2006 by the Ministry of Health Malaysia, showed that the great majority (over 80%) of Malaysian children have satisfactory nutritional status. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of about 15% the children were found to be underweight, stunted or wasted.

Other studies in the country have identified micronutrient deficiencies such as iron, iodine



The theme for this year's Nutrition Month Malaysia is 'Happy Children, Healthier Nation'.

and vitamin A amongst selected population groups.

At the same time, overweight was also found to be a significant problem, although it was of a lower magnitude, as it affected only 5% of the children studied.

Compared with findings reported three decades ago, these recent findings show that the nutritional status of children in Malaysia has improved markedly over the years. There is, however, no room for complacency. All attention and effort must continue to be directed to improving child nutritional status and optimising their growth and development. On the other hand, although overweight was not highlighted in previous studies, it is now a significant problem amongst young children.

NMM 2009 focuses on healthy children, healthier nation

Available research data have also clearly showed that younger children, particularly those in the one to six year group, are the most affected by nutritional problems. This is true for both undernutrition and overnutrition. This is not surprising at all as these are the most vulnerable groups and growth and development are rapid. Any nutrient deficiencies and excesses will have a marked impact on their nutritional status.

Recognising the importance of improving the nutritional status of Malaysian children, NMM 2009 is focusing on the theme "Healthy Children, Healthier Nation". This is intended to bring about greater awareness of childhood nutrition to all parents, provide them with basic knowledge about child nutrition and practical guides. It is a call for all stakeholders (government, industry, professional organisations, consumer bodies and the public) to collaborate in promoting healthier Malaysian children.

These educational materials have started to roll out in major newspapers in the past weeks. The major publications will commence to be published from April 4, in conjunction with a family carnival.

As Chairperson of the Steering Committee for NMM 2009, I would like to share with you the major educational materials and activities that will be carried out in the next few weeks. I am very excited because there will be more activities during NMM 2009 compared to NMM of previous years!

NMM is able to conduct all these activities only because of financial support from the Health Promotion Board Malaysia as well as several food companies in the country. The Steering Committee of NMM gratefully acknowledge their generous support.

Guide and recipe books for parents

Two booklets shall form the "heroes" of the programme, namely *Raising Healthy Eaters* (RHE) and *Easy Nutrition Planner* (ENP). Both booklets are targeted at parents. The first booklet shall provide parents with simple basic knowledge about child nutrition; meal planning and shopping; healthy cooking; healthy eating guides including the child food pyramid; common nutritional problems; and weight monitoring.

The *Easy Nutrition Planner* focuses on providing practical guides and tips on healthy eating, cooking methods, meal planning, shopping, food storage, an FAQ section and also several recipes. Besides these, a booklet entitled *Creative Recipes with Bread* for children will be published.

These booklets, in Bahasa Malaysia and English, have turned out to be more substantial than I had first envisaged. These and other publications of NMM have been prepared by local nutritionists and dietitians, members of the three partner professional bodies. Great pains have been taken to ensure that information provided is unbiased and factually correct. All efforts have been made to provide practical guidance and tips, relevant to current scenarios.

We hope you take great pleasure and joy reading these books. You'll discover that with the right guidance and information, cooking healthy and giving your children good nutrition need not be daunting. Make time and effort and you will find that feeding young children can even be fun!

Materials for kindergarten teachers

Based on the information in the *Raising Healthy Eater* booklet, a DVD that can be used by kindergarten teachers to teach toddlers healthy eating has been produced. Messages in the DVD are short and tuned to the level of young children.

To further make learning these messages fun for the kids, worksheets for colouring and simple quizzes have been prepared. A training seminar on the use of the RHE, DVD and

worksheets is being planned for the end of April, where kindergarten teachers from various parts of the country will be invited to participate.

The booklets mentioned above and the DVD and associated worksheets will be provided free to nutritionists in all state health departments. It is our hope that these will be made use of at the local level for organising talks, seminars and training sessions in order to reach out to wider segments of the community.

Press article contributions

There will be a number of press articles to reach out to all parents throughout the country. The first four articles have been scheduled for publication from mid-March till the first week of April. All these write-ups, to be published in an English, Malay and Chinese national newspaper, are short articles, providing key points and guides on various aspects of childhood nutrition.

The second series of five articles will focus on different aspects of a "dream" child that every parent wishes for. These include aspects of a healthy child, a curious child, a smart child and a cheerful child. Further articles will focus on appropriate snacking habits, a healthy digestive system and probiotics (healthy bacteria).

Fun and learning in NMM 2009 family carnival

In addition to these educational materials, various outreach activities have also been planned. The main event is a NMM 2009 family carnival, scheduled for April 4-5 in Mid Valley Exhibition Centre. This will also be the official launch of NMM 2009 and the various activities planned include family and child nutrition screening, a toddler talent contest, games, quizzes and trade exhibition by sponsors of NMM 2009.

Educational materials of NMM and the Nutrition Society of Malaysia will be distributed during the event. Additional roadshows are also being planned for Penang and Johor Bahru.

All activities will be provided free of charge, including nutrition screening. It will be a great opportunity for you to know your body mass index (BMI), blood pressure, body fat, and blood cholesterol and glucose. Your child's BMI can also be assessed. You will be able to discuss with individual nutritionists and dietitians these screening results as well as raise any concerns and questions.

Make time for your children

You must make time now. Seize the moment, and devote yourself to the health of your children. Find time to ensure that the nutritional needs of your children are met. Find time to be with your children, to know your children.

Make full use of all nutrition information to be provided by NMM2009. Check out these materials on the Nutrition Society of Malaysia website (www.nutriweb.org.my) as they become available in the next few weeks.

■ *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. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.