



Nutrition month

Nutrition Month Malaysia 2010 (NMM 2010) focuses on healthy eating and active living among primary school children.

As your child begins to adjust to life at school and gets closer to his new friends, you may notice that there's a change in his food preferences and eating habits. For instance, he might be skipping meals, eating very little, or snacking excessively.

These changes have come about as a result of the increasing freedom and sense of independence a school-going child enjoys. Many parents feel that since their child is "big" enough to attend school, he or she is also mature enough to pick and choose their own food. This is when he might pick up bad eating habits.

Your school-going child is at an age where he's easily influenced. He now spends more time with friends at school and during extra-curricular activities. The TV or computer is his constant companion when he gets home. These could very well be his main sources of influence.

Do not let that happen. You, as parents, must be the main influence during this crucial growing period of this life. Empower yourself; be a role model and learn how to feed your child right.

NMM 2010

Initiated in 2002, Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) has been observed in the month of April for the past eight years. The objective of NMM is to promote greater awareness and the practice of healthy eating and active living, in line with the Government's healthy lifestyle programme.

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. For the year 2010, the Ministry of Education is also collaborating in this programme.

Over the years, a number of activities have been carried out during NMM. Activities include publishing educational materials such as guidebooks and educational articles; seminars and workshops; roadshows and exhibitions at community level.

Available data from various studies have highlighted the underweight and overweight problems affecting children in Malaysia, as well as iron deficiency anaemia, vitamin A deficiency, and iodine deficiency disorder as among the most important micronutrient deficiencies. The National Plan for Nutrition of Malaysia (NPANM II 2006-2015) has therefore given due focus to improving the nutritional status of children in the country.

NMM had therefore given attention to improving nutritional status of children for a period of three years. In the first year, in 2009, focus was given to children below six years. In 2010, NMM will for the second consecutive year, focus on children, but now move on to the next phase, which is the primary school aged children (ages seven - 12 years). This is an important phase of children's life to start inculcating healthy eating habits that will provide a strong foundation as they grow into adulthood.

With the theme "Healthy Children, Healthier Nation - Start Young", NMM intends to empower parents to raise healthy, active children. NMM will focus on bringing about greater awareness of the importance of optimum nutrition, physical activities, and hygiene in children to all parents and caretakers, thus equipping 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.

Comic books, guide books and more

activities targeting both parents and primary school children. The "heroes" of NMM 2010 shall be the two publications, namely *Smart Nutrition for Your Growing, Active Kids*, which is a guide book for parents, and *Kembara Alam Sam*, a comic and activity booklet for children.

The guide book is an informative publication that aims to empower parents by providing them with simple basic knowledge about nutrition, meal planning, healthy cooking, as well as healthy eating guides. This book also aims to help parents inculcate healthy eating habits in children as well as imparting nutrition knowledge in them.

Educating children on healthy eating has always been a challenge. As such, the comic and activity booklet *Kembara Alam Sam* has been developed to spark children's interest to learn the basics of healthy eating and healthy living through fun, interesting stories. The book also has sections on simple activities to reinforce the key messages and thus making learning fun.

This would go a long way towards promoting optimal nutrition and inculcating healthy eating habits and physical activity into our younger generation.

Apart from these two publications, there will be a number of educational press articles to reach out to all parents throughout the country.

NutriFun roadshows in schools

In addition to these print educational campaigns, various outreach activities targeting both children and parents have also been planned. The highlight is the series of fun-educational school road shows called Nutrifun which will be conducted in 65 schools in the Klang Valley.

Through these road shows, NMM hopes to impart simple yet fun, basic healthy eating messages to the primary school children. Messages will be conveyed directly to students through a "fun story-telling session". It is also through these road shows that the

educational materials, such as the comic and activity booklet, educational classroom posters, and a book mark will be distributed.

To further reinforce the importance of healthy eating amongst primary school children, NMM will also carry out an inter-school contest titled, "Buku Skrap Sihatku". This contest aims to encourage children to express what they learnt from the NutriFun school road show into a scrap book. The children will be required to describe their daily meals and activities for one week in this scrape book. This can be through notes, drawings or picture cuttings. In this contest, the schools will be looped in to encourage their respective students to participate.

Fun and learning for the family

For the parents and the public, the highlight will be a family carnival titled "Healthy Children, Healthier Nation - Start Young", scheduled on May 15-16 in Mid Valley Exhibition Centre. This two-day event will have a wide range of fun-filled and educational activities for all members of the family.

For the children, the main attractions will be the NutriActive Corner where they will be able to play educational games such as the Food Pyramid, preparing healthy breakfast, physical activity games, as well as kid's performances and quizzes. The family and child nutrition screening will include measurements such as body mass index, blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol levels. Individual food and nutrition advice will be given by nutritionists and dietitians.

Parents will receive a copy of the guide book. No fees are required for participating in any of these activities whilst visitors can expect giveaways/samplings by the sponsors of NMM 2010.

Your child looks up to you as a role model. Make full use of this fact to teach him about the goodness and benefits of good nutrition, healthy eating habits, and physical activity. By doing so, you're influencing his food choices

when he's away from home. More importantly, you're also influencing his food choices in the future.

You should first empower yourself with the appropriate nutrition knowledge. Seek advice from a nutritionist or dietitian or your family doctor and learn the basics of good nutrition and how best to feed your child. You can also read up on good nutrition to arm yourself with the right information. You're more inclined to teach and empower your child when you yourself are confident with the knowledge you have.

For those readers who are nutritionists, dietitians, doctors, and other health professionals, I would urge you to help promote the messages of NMM, to promote healthy eating and active living. There is a need to continue to empower Malaysians with healthy eating knowledge. There is a need for continuous efforts to provide more unbiased nutrition information to the public.

There is therefore a need for Nutrition Month Malaysia to continue and grow and reach out to all segments of the population. And you have an important role to play.

■ *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.*