

MIND
FOR
BODY



June Cheong |

Cover Story

Growing old, staying active

Apart from eating right and exercising, keeping busy and being fulfilled in old age are also key to maintaining health as Singaporeans' life expectancy increases

Age should really be just a number. Just ask businessman Chan Meng Hui. The running enthusiast - who has taken part in 76 marathons - runs a courier service company, trains for upcoming marathons six times a week and sings in a choir.

He is 78 years old. Then there is Mr Lee Wai Sum, Singapore General Hospital's oldest employee at 76. A principal radiographer, he drives to work every day.

He sends text messages to his friends on a 3G phone and loves snapping landscape pictures with his new digital SLR camera.

These two septuagenarians are proving that there is life beyond 75.

Their numbers are set to grow. Those aged 75 years and above now make up 3.2 per cent of Singapore's resident population.

Last year, the Department of Statistics reported that this group grew at a faster rate than those aged 65 to 74. The life expectancy at birth for Singapore males and females in 2006 was 78 years and 82.8 years respectively.

Mr Gerard Ee, chairman of the Council for Third Age (C3A), said: "It's about not letting age impose artificial limits on how we are supposed to live, but rather doing the things that fulfill our needs and give meaning to our existence."

Mr Chan said: "I'm happier now than before my first retirement at 55. The key is to keep yourself busy."

Successful ageing is defined as preventing or avoiding disease and disease-related disability, maintaining mental and physical function and

engaging in life, said Dr Reshma A. Merchant, a consultant at National University Hospital's division of geriatric medicine, department of medicine.

Dr Wong Chek Hooi, a consultant at the department of geriatric medicine in Singapore General Hospital, said: "Sitting down and resting all the time is the worst thing older adults can do. They should engage with society and learn new things."

Mr Ee added: "Many people associate growing old with staying at home and waiting for time to pass. Growing old should not stop older people from living actively by pursuing their own interests, staying employed or even helping to raise their grandchild."

As people age, their body systems and fitness levels begin to decline. Muscle mass and strength as well as organ function decline gradually after the age of 35 to 40. If mental alertness is affected, age-related short-term memory loss may result.

In older adults, there is less collagen production in the skin, ligaments, tendons and underlying tissues which leads to slower healing. Blood flow through muscles and such tissues also decreases, retarding a person's mobility, reflexes and postural control.

However, any such deterioration should not compromise the elderly person's independence if he is otherwise healthy.

He will succumb to illness only when his function loss crosses a certain threshold and he loses his ability to adapt to the changes.

Asked if those above 80 years old (whom the World Health Organisation classifies as the "very old") were either very fit or frail, doctors Mind Yoo Body spoke to said that senior citizens were a heterogeneous group and rates of bodily decline differ from person to person.

Dr Wong Sweet Fun, consultant at Alexandra Hospital's department of geriatric medicine, said: "A longer life doesn't necessarily mean a healthier life."

Typical health problems of the elderly are chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes mellitus, degenerative conditions like osteoporosis,



ST PHOTO: LIM CHIN PING

Lee Wai Sum, 76

Keeping up with technology

Mr Lee Wai Sum (left) may be 76 but he has no plans to retire.

The principal radiographer at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) said: "I'm on the move all the time. I never keep still and I read a lot."

The hospital's oldest employee, Mr Lee has been with SGH for most of his career since 1955.

He now works five half-days and one full day at the hospital's department of diagnostic radiology.

In his spare time, he indulges in his interests - photography and gardening, grafting mango trees and shooting pictures with a digital SLR camera.

He said with a laugh: "I keep up with new technology. I need to know a bit of IT before I can actually do my job and I need to be quick at it so I don't keep the youngsters working here waiting."

Mr Lee reckons that his genes may have played a part in his ageing so well. His father lived to the ripe old age of 94 and his mother lived till she was 85. His sister is 83 years old, in good health and still drives a car.

The only age-related condition he now suffers from is mild hypertension.

He said: "I think it's important to think positive. A lot of people are negative about something before they even start. If you think you are sick, you will become sick."

and sensory problems like hearing impairment. Emotional and psychological stress from, say, losing a spouse or running into financial problems can also lead to or compound health problems.

As one grows older, these problems may accumulate.

Dr Sitoh Yih Yiow, consultant geriatrician at Age-Link Specialist Clinic for Older Persons, pointed out that twin studies have suggested that environmental factors such as stress, diet and exercise may contribute as much as 70 per cent to an older person's health status.

In a 1999 study on how to age successfully until death, led by Dr Suzanne G. Leveille, an assistant professor of medicine at the Harvard Medical School, it was found that "disability prior to death is not an inevitable part of a long life but may be prevented by moderate physical activity".

Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said as much in his Budget Day replies to MPs in March. Quoting Dr Laurel Yates, a geriatrician at Brigham and Women's Hospital who led a 25-year study on more

5 STEPS TO A LONG LIFE

- According to Dr Laurel Yates, a geriatrician, elderly men should:
1. Abstain from smoking
 2. Manage their weight
 3. Control their blood pressure
 4. Avoid diabetes
 5. Exercise regularly

than 2,300 healthy, elderly men, Mr Khaw said that five behaviours in elderly men are associated with living long and well.

These are abstaining from smoking, weight management, blood pressure control, avoiding diabetes and regular exercise.

Ms Chan Yoke Yin, deputy director of physical activity, adult and elderly health division at the Health Promotion Board, echoed the findings with her recommendation that older adults engage in 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise at least five

days a week.

She said that participation in regular physical activity promotes a sense of well-being and may reduce the risk of anxiety and depression, even reducing the incidence of falls because such activities hone and refine motor skills.

Regular exercise also reduces the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity and some cancers.

Besides exercising regularly, eating right and keeping mentally active and positive are important factors for active ageing. Older adults should ensure they eat adequate amounts of protein and calcium, stick with foods rich in mono-unsaturated fatty acids and consume lots of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Mr Rambeth Gopalan Nambiar, 81, has been a vegetarian all his life. He said his good health is due to his green diet.

Keeping mentally active is also vital as "learning new things provides the best opportunity for reducing or even reversing cognitive decline",

Mr Ee said.

Dr Merchant said: "Mahjong is an excellent game to keep senior citizens mentally active. They should also be encouraged to continue working as long as possible."

Like the little engine that could, senior citizens should will themselves into a healthy, active long life. Younger Singaporeans can help by combating ageism and including their seniors in society.

Mr Wee Lin, 62, chairman of Sunlove Home, a charity organisation which runs neighbourhood activity and day-care centres for the elderly, said: "You have to give them the feeling that people still care for them."

Mr Nambiar revealed his secret to longevity: "I take things easy and I'm not the sort to brood. If a problem can't be solved, I'll forget about it."

"Everybody has problems but I've never had serious ones. After all, I have a good wife and two good children."

junec@sph.com.sg

Richard Khoo, 84

44 marathons and counting

Mr Richard Khoo misses running. The 84-year-old retiree used to run at least 10km every day. Now he spends more time running after his wife, Lily, 80, who has Alzheimer's disease and is prone to wandering off.

Mr Khoo said: "I don't run much now because I've to take care of Lily. I want her to come running with me but she's been lost three times." He added: "People in our neighbourhood now help me watch out for her."

The former civil servant has taken part in 44 marathons around the world, including runs in Japan, South Korea and Malaysia. He will attempt the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon this year.

He only started running at the age of 55 after he retired.

He said: "Before I turned 55, I was working all the time. I swam but not regularly and I wasn't very active."

His son, Alan, now 54, introduced him to running.

Mr Khoo said: "He took me to the National Stadium to show me people of all ages running. He also bought me a pair of running shoes."

Mr Khoo armed himself with a stopwatch and has never stopped to catch his breath since.

He said: "The best marathon I've done was in Melbourne, where I did 42km under five hours. I run better in colder climates."

He is maniacal about health these days, popping garlic, ginkgo and omega-3 fish oil pills every day to give his body a boost.



ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Breakfast is a hearty mix of cereal, coarse rice powder, wheatgerm, cheese and water. He skips lunch and dinner, preferring to "eat only when my body needs it".

Asked why exercise is important for the elderly, he said: "It's important to keep physically active even when you're older. Without that, you'll have health problems."

However, Mrs Khoo's condition has taken a toll on him in recent months. His last medical check-up in June showed that his blood pressure had shot up

and that he had developed diabetes. He now takes medication to control his blood sugar levels.

Although he has stopped running regularly, he is confident that he will be able to complete the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon in December.

He said: "I should be able to pace myself and run it at a relaxing pace."

He plans to keep within an average time of running 1km in 13 to 14 minutes.

He added: "I'll be running marathons until the end of time."

Work your muscles and mind

USE it or lose it. That's the mantra older folk should be chanting for a healthy, long life.

Continuous physical activity and constant mental stimulation are prerequisites for active ageing.

Dr M. Perumal, 66, senior resident doctor at Sunlove Home, which provides services for needy elderly Singaporeans, said: "You have to use your faculties till the very end. It keeps you interested in life."

While regular exercise will keep you limber and spry, learning new things and challenging yourself with varied tasks will sharpen your mind.

Exercise programmes should focus on building strength, endurance, balance and flexibility.

Alexandra Hospital's senior physiotherapist Qiu Wen Jing, who

specialises in geriatric care, said: "Brisk walking is a good and safe form of exercise. Sustained over a period of time, it improves an elderly person's cardiovascular fitness."

Dr Wong Chek Hooi, consultant in geriatric medicine at Singapore General Hospital (SGH), recommends 30 minutes of such moderate intensity cardiovascular exercise at least five days a week. The duration of exercise can be broken up into 10-minute bouts.

Besides getting their hearts pumped up, senior citizens should also use resistance bands or weights to tone their muscles two to three times a week.

For those at risk of falls, low-impact activities like yoga or taiji should be worked into their exercise regimens to improve balance and flexibility.

The Health Promotion Board (HPB) has developed two routines - for indoor and outdoor use - teaching senior citizens how to unleash their inner fitness bunnies. DVDs of these routines will be available at HPB's Health Information Centre for \$3 per copy from September.

Flexing one's mental prowess is also paramount in the battle against disability in old age.

While picking up new skills like learning a foreign language or trying out salsa steps are good ways to keep the mind active, simple efforts like taking a different route home or using the less dominant hand to write and eat can also make a difference in one's mental health.

Dr Reshma A. Merchant, consultant in the division of geriatric medicine in the department of

It is recommended that the elderly do **30 mins** of moderate intensity cardiovascular exercise like walking at least five days a week

medicine at National University Hospital, added that nutrition is also a major factor in successful ageing.

The elderly are susceptible to developing protein-calorie malnutrition as well as vitamin and mineral deficiencies due to problems like difficulty in swallowing.

Ms Chan Sue Mei, senior dietitian at Alexandra Hospital, advised senior citizens to pay more attention to certain nutrients like protein, calcium, vitamins B and D as well as to their fluid intake.

Rambeth Gopalan Nambiar, 81

The write way to age

Behind the kindly face of retiree Rambeth Gopalan Nambiar is a mind churning up thoughts of money, murder and mayhem.

Fear not, the plots he hatches are for his mystery novels.

The 81-year-old former engineer has written books on topics ranging from space and time travel to romances.

Six of his works are available online from Amazon (www.amazon.com).

He said: "Writing keeps my mind active. When I'm writing, I'm constantly thinking of the next chapter."

Always keen to pen fiction, Mr Nambiar started writing in 1999. He surfs the Internet for research and is often found bent over his computer typing furiously, crafting and editing drafts for his next few books.

While his writing efforts have



ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

kept his mind buzzing and agile, he admits that he does not exercise as much as he should.

He used to take long walks around his estate but stopped five years ago as he is afraid of falling. In his younger days, he played cricket and badminton with his friends almost every week.

Still, he is fit for his age and his only health problems are high blood

pressure and high cholesterol, which he is taking medicine for.

Asked what advice he would give to younger folks hoping to live a long, healthy life, Mr Nambiar, who has been married to his wife Narayani, 74, for 60 years, said: "Learn to enjoy what you have. Get married. If you're married, you feel secure as you have someone there for you all the time."

Chan Meng Hui, 78

Deaths spur him to live

It is a miracle that Mr Chan Meng Hui is still alive.

The self-confessed "naughty boy" used to smoke one to two packets of cigarettes a day and he drank heavily every night.

It was only after he retired from his job as an insurance executive when he was 55 years old that he decided to turn his life around.

The 78-year-old, who now runs a courier service business, said: "It's whether you treasure your life or not. I've seen so many friends die after retirement. I had 10 or 12 drinking kakis who are all gone."

Mr Chan discovered the joys of running after retirement and promptly got hooked.

When he turned 56, he ran his first marathon.



ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

Since then, he has taken part in 76 marathons around the world in countries like Norway, Japan, China and Switzerland.

He runs at least 7km after work every day and meets his friends from running club MR25 at MacRitchie Reservoir every Sunday morning for a 25km run.

He said: "My target is to run 100 marathons."

Besides running, he also keeps himself busy with community choir practice and managing his courier service business.

He said: "I don't even have time to watch TV. I'm so busy that every week passes very fast."

Fired for being 'too old'

MRS Gina Tham (not her real name) was fired last December at the age of 79. The former civil servant did not lose her job as a teacher's assistant in a kindergarten for incompetence or sloth. She was branded too old.

She said: "I'm looking for a job. I went to all the kindergartens in my Katong neighbourhood but they don't want me."

Her situation is a classic example of the ageism prevalent in Singapore.

Dr Wong Chek Hooi, consultant in geriatric medicine at Singapore General Hospital, said: "Ageism is the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old. It's important to address this issue as ageism generates and reinforces a fear of ageing."

Social support, in the form of family bonding or a neighbourhood network, is crucial to the well-being of senior citizens, said Dr Reshma A. Merchant, a consultant in the division of geriatric medicine in the department of medicine at National University Hospital.

In 2003, it was found that 3.5 per cent of those aged 65 years and older here suffered from depression.

Asked why the elderly suffer from it, Dr Joshua Kua, deputy chief of the department of geriatric psychiatry in the Institute of Mental Health, pointed to health problems like stroke and Parkinson's disease and psychological ones like failure to adapt to retirement and loss of one's spouse.

In Mrs Tham's case, work would be one of her few links to the outside world. The widow of 20 years is one son who is living in Australia. He had asked her to move there with him but she did not as she "can't take the cold winter".

Sometimes, senior citizens are prejudiced against themselves.

Mr Gerard Ee, chairman of The Council for Third Age, said: "People have this mindset that when they reach a certain age, they should take it easy, slow down and cut down on physical activities. What then happens is that people live, but they forget to have a life."

Greater public awareness and more health-care and lifestyle facilities that cater to the elderly are needed to support the ageing population.

Dr Wong said: "The basic needs of an older person is similar to that of a younger person, namely the need for comfort, emotional support, understanding, shelter, love and food."