

PRESS RELEASE

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Live long and prosper – but only if you live healthily

Singapore, 18 October 2022 – Remember those times when our mothers and doctors told us to exercise regularly, eat more vegetables and fruit, cut down on alcohol consumption and stop smoking? They were right in more ways than we knew.

A new Singaporean study has found that older people who diligently keep to such healthy lifestyle habits enjoy good health as they age. It found that higher scores of the protective lifestyle factors were associated with a higher likelihood of healthy ageing and its various domains. Furthermore, improvement in lifestyle after midlife – defined as adhering to four or five recommended lifestyle factors – was also significantly associated with a higher likelihood of healthy ageing. The study team, which included members from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, scrutinised data drawn from more than 14,000 Singaporeans, who participated in a 20-year long large cohort study called the Singapore Chinese Health Study.

By 2030, one in four people in Singapore will be aged 65 years and older, according to a report by the Government's National Population and Talent Division. While Singaporeans are living longer – with the average age being 84 – ten of these years are spent in poor health. The accelerated process of ageing is accompanied by increases in age-related diseases and functional disabilities, causing tremendous individual and societal burdens. Hence, it is critical to identify modifiable factors affecting healthy ageing. Several studies have examined the links between individual lifestyle factors, including diet, body weight, physical activity, smoking and alcohol consumption, with the likelihood of healthy ageing in various populations. However, although lifestyle factors are not isolated, only four studies in Europe and Latin America have evaluated the association between combined lifestyle factors and healthy ageing. No similar study has been conducted in an Asian population till now. In addition, lifestyle factors may change over time, and it is unclear if improvement in lifestyle factors after midlife will improve the likelihood of healthy ageing.

In the study, which was published in a recent edition of the *J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci*, the researchers used data from about 14,000 participants of the Singapore Chinese Health Study, and examined the association of individual and combined lifestyle factors (BMI, diet, physical activity, smoking, and alcohol drinking) at baseline (average age of 53 years) and follow-up visits (average age of 64 years old), with the likelihood of healthy ageing defined at average age of 74 years.

The study showed that each one-point increase in the protective lifestyle score computed at baseline and follow-up visits was associated with higher likelihood of healthy ageing at a later stage in life by 25% (95% CI: 20%–30%) and 24% (18%–29%), respectively. In addition, positive increase in lifestyle scores from baseline to follow-up visits was also significantly associated with a higher likelihood of healthy ageing in later life, with an odds ratio of 1.18 (95% CI: 1.12%–1.24%) for each increment in protective lifestyle score.

Said the study's senior author, Professor Koh Woon Puay from the Healthy Longevity Translational Research Programme at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore (NUS Medicine), "Adherence to a healthier lifestyle may potentially increase the number of people with healthy ageing, which in turn reduces the burden of diseases and maintains the quality of life in ageing. Unfortunately, in this study, only 8.5% of the participants adhered to 4 or 5 recommended lifestyle factors, whereas 33% adopted none or only one such factor at baseline."

This study provides strong evidence that emphasizes the importance of improvements in lifestyle behaviors to reduce disease and mortality risk and increase possibility of healthy ageing in Singapore. Hence, public health educational efforts that focus on smoking cessation, promoting a physical activity-friendly environment, accessibility and affordability of healthy foods, and weight management will need to be strengthened.

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Our multidisciplinary and real-world approach to education, research and entrepreneurship enables us to work closely with industry, governments and academia to address crucial and complex issues relevant to Asia and the world. Researchers in our faculties, research centres of excellence, corporate labs and more than 30 university-level research institutes focus on themes that include energy; environmental and urban sustainability; treatment and prevention of diseases; active ageing; advanced materials; risk management and resilience of financial systems; Asian studies; and Smart Nation capabilities such as artificial intelligence, data science, operations research and cybersecurity.

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Through a dynamic and future-oriented five-year curriculum that is inter-disciplinary and inter-professional in nature, our students undergo a holistic learning experience that exposes them to multiple facets of healthcare and prepares them to become visionary leaders and compassionate doctors and nurses of tomorrow. Since the School's founding in 1905, more than 12,000 graduates have passed through our doors.

In our pursuit of health for all, our strategic research programmes focus on innovative, cutting-edge biomedical research with collaborators around the world to deliver high impact solutions to benefit human lives.

The School is the oldest institution of higher learning in the National University of Singapore and a founding institutional member of the National University Health System. It is one of the leading medical schools in Asia and ranks among the best in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022 by subject and the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings by subject 2021).

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