

MIND & BODY

Living with dementia

More help at hand for dementia patients

Efforts include exercises to delay onset of disease, more dementia-friendly communities



Joyce Teo

More helping hands will be extended to people suffering from dementia, through community efforts that are being strengthened even as the incidence rises in Singapore with the ageing population.

An estimated one in 10 people aged 60 and above has dementia, which is the gradual decline of the brain and its intellectual abilities such as thinking, memory and judgment. Half of those aged 85 and older have it. By 2030, the number of people with dementia in Singapore is expected to more than double to 103,000.

As dementia plays havoc with a person's daily life, the sufferers are not the only ones who are overwhelmed, but their family members and caregivers as well.

Last week, the Health Ministry said it would increase the number of dementia-friendly communities here from six to 15 in the next three years or so. The six are Yishun, MacPherson, Hong Kah North, Bedok, Queenstown and Fengshan.

In these communities, many residents and businesses are trained to recognise signs of dementia and help those who might have them.

Yishun was the first so-called dementia-friendly community here, set up by Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) and the Lien Foundation under the Forget Us Not initiative.

So far, under the initiative, KTPH has provided training for about 20,000 laypeople from 90 organisations nationwide. For instance, if a person with dementia takes items

from a supermarket without paying, the staff will not immediately assume he is shoplifting.

KTPH is also working with Apex Harmony Lodge, the first home for people with dementia here, to empower people with mild dementia to continue to lead dignified lives by engaging in work as a form of therapy to provide meaning and purpose, said Associate Professor Philip Yap, senior consultant and director of the geriatric centre at KTPH.

Another community effort, which started in August last year in the western region and is set to expand, aims to help frail elderly people delay the onset of dementia through engaging in specific exercises. Being old and frail puts one at a high risk of developing dementia.

More than 300 elderly folk in the west have done the exercises twice a week for at least six months at various community and senior activity centres under the Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You (Happy). These sessions are free.

And about 100 of them have been recruited for longitudinal follow-up, to see if the exercises

103,000

Expected number of people with dementia in Singapore by 2030, more than double the figure now.

20,000

Number of people from 90 organisations who have undergone training under the Forget Us Not initiative.



Bukit Panjang MP Teo Ho Pin speaking on Sunday at Bukit Panjang CC, where exercises to delay the onset of dementia were demonstrated.

recounting the names of fruit or hawker food that the other people here like to eat," said Prof Merchant. "These activities can be done in groups of five so this increases social interaction."

In Japan, the Cognicise programme has run for more than three years, and has shown that those with mild cognitive impairment showed significant improvement in memory after doing these activities for 10 months, said Prof Merchant.

"These dual-task exercises work the body as well as the mind, and encourage the person to focus on coordinating the two activities, which help with cognitive ability, preventing frailty and reducing disability."

A Japanese therapist who was trained at NCGG was brought in for two years to help set up the Happy programme here.

Prof Merchant said they are working with the Agency for Integrated Care to scale it up in Singapore and have plans to launch it in other parts of Singapore.

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will help to improve their memory, and reduce frailty and associated disability, said Associate Professor Reshma Merchant, head and senior consultant at the division of geriatric medicine at National University Hospital.

Demo sessions have also been held at community events all over Singapore since August, with the lat-

est one held at the Bukit Panjang Community Club on Sunday.

These are not simple exercises but dual-task activities that are adapted from the "Cognicise" programme at the National Centre for Geriatrics and Gerontology (NCGG) in Japan.

"For instance, while I am marching, I am counting 30 backwards or



The crowd at the Bukit Panjang Community Club on Sunday engaging in a mass demonstration of dual-task activities – which have been shown to help improve memory – under the Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You. ST PHOTO: ALVIN HO

Get rid of bad habits to cut risk

Dementia, which results from certain diseases or injuries, of which Alzheimer's disease is the most common, may leave you bewildered at the changes in your brain.

But there are things you can do to delay the onset of the condition as well as its progression, doctors said.

The two most important risk factors for dementia are age and a positive family history of dementia, that is a genetic predisposition, said Associate Professor Philip Yap, a senior consultant and the director of the geriatric centre at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital.

The risk increases with age, with it doubling every five years after 65 years.

Those who have a parent or sibling suffering from dementia are also at an increased risk of getting it, said Prof Yap.

"It is hard to prevent dementia because while the ageing process can be delayed, it is not preventable."

If you have the genes that predispose you to dementia, the genes cannot be altered. But there is ongoing research in the field of gene therapy, he said.

For these reasons, dementia is hard to prevent altogether.

However, there are several modifiable risk factors that, if addressed, may delay the onset and progression of the disease. They include:

- Biomedical factors, which include diabetes, mid-life hypertension, mid-life obesity, hyperlipidemia, hearing loss;
- Lifestyle factors, such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, decreased physical or cognitive engagement and chronic poor sleep; and
- Psychological and social factors, which include depression, loneliness and social isolation, as well as a limited formal education.

For instance, being married and very satisfied with life reduces the risk of dementia, said Associate Professor Ng Tze Pin, the principal investigator of the long-term Singapore Longitudinal Ageing Study.

Among these factors are two relatively "new" ones – sleep deprivation and hearing loss, Prof Yap pointed out.

"Sufficient sleep, especially slow-wave, deep sleep, is needed for effective consolidation of informa-

KEEPING HEALTHY

Healthy lifestyle habits such as exercise and eating a nutritious and balanced diet should start as early as possible, as with the need to build sufficient brain reserves by having more years of formal education.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR PHILIP YAP, a senior consultant and the director of the geriatric centre at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital.

tion. So if sleep is poor, the information is poorly stored in the brain," he said.

"In addition, poor sleep has been shown to be associated with increased accumulation of the primary pathological drivers of Alzheimer's disease in the plaques and tangles in the brain."

Recently, a local study conducted by the National University of Singa-

pore, together with Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, found that hearing loss can increase the risk of dementia by about two times, which highlighted the need for early diagnosis and intervention for hearing loss in order to delay dementia.

"People think that people think that hearing loss is a part of ageing and do not do anything about it," said Associate Professor Reshma Merchant, the head and senior consultant at the division of geriatric medicine at the National University Hospital.

But those with hearing loss may need more effort to hear a degraded sound, so fewer brain resources are available for thinking and memory, for instance. They may also be more socially isolated, which puts them at risk of cognitive decline.

"If you continue smoking, are depressed and physically inactive, your risk of dementia will rise," said Prof Reshma.

Importantly, in order to prevent dementia, one must consider modifying risk factors throughout one's life, said Prof Yap.

"Healthy lifestyle habits such as exercise and eating a nutritious and balanced diet should start as early as possible, as with the need to build sufficient brain reserves by having more years of formal education," he said.

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Do 'memory-boosting' supplements work?

It's natural to want to avoid memory loss with age, and the many supplements being touted out there are tempting.

Today, one can easily find supplements that may include ginkgo biloba, vitamin E or fish oil that claim to help with brain power or memory. The claims are attractive but do these "brain boosters" work?

"We often encounter people with complaints of memory or cognitive decline turning to nutraceuticals, vitamins and other supplements in the hope of improving their memory and cognitive performance," said Associate Professor Philip Yap, senior consultant and director of the geriatric centre at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. However, there is no robust research evidence that shows that these are effective in boosting memory or preventing dementia, he said.

Associate Professor Reshma Merchant, head and senior consultant at the division of geriatric medicine at National University Hospital, said: "I wouldn't recom-

mend taking supplements just to prevent dementia because a lot of the association has been with actual food products, rather than with supplements."

While vitamin B12 has been proven to help memory, it is useful only for those who are deficient in it, such as diabetics who are taking Metformin (a medicine used to treat Type 2 diabetes) and vegans, she said.

If cognitive deficits are persistent and affect daily functioning, it is best to undergo an early assessment by a medical practitioner, advised Prof Yap.

So far, medical research supports good lifestyle habits in regular physical exercise, mental and social engagement, a healthy and balanced diet with adequate sleep, and avoiding harmful habits such as smoking and excessive drinking, said Prof Yap.

He urged people to keep learning something new as they age, to stay socially connected and engage in physical exercise.

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