

## Adding life to years

OUR interview with consultant Dr Sitoh Yih Yiow of Parkway Health Group uncovers tips for living well.

Says consultant geriatrician Dr Sitoh Yih Yiow: “Growing old doesn’t mean that one needs to stop doing the things that one likes to do. Nor does it mean the surrender of dreams or aspirations. A healthy and active lifestyle, conducive environment and supportive society are also important.”

To age successfully, these are the things you can do\*:

### **AVOIDING DISEASE**

For the elderly in Singapore, the top killer diseases, according to Dr Sitoh, are cancer, heart disease, pneumonia, strokes, diabetes mellitus and chronic obstructive lung disease.

He says: “From the geriatrician’s viewpoint, early detection of chronic diseases and proper management of these conditions are extremely important.”



**Hence, going for regular health screening — so that diseases can be detected and treated early — is crucial.** Dr Sitoh suggests that regular screening be done for hypertension and diabetes after the age of 40, screening for glaucoma and macular degeneration after 50, and screening for osteoporosis after 65.

But if there is a family history of certain diseases, like breast or colon cancer, earlier screening is highly recommended.

## MAINTAINING HIGH COGNITIVE AND PHYSICAL FUNCTIONS

For our brains and bodies to be working well into our old age, the adage **“use it or lose it”** is apt.

Studies have shown that when it comes to brain degeneration, conditions like dementia, memory loss and even Alzheimer’s disease can be delayed with brain-stimulating exercises — like doing crossword puzzles, playing mahjong and social interaction.

Physically, Dr Sitoh recommends — in order of priority — stretching, strengthening, balance and stamina exercises for the aged.

He says: “Stretching and flexibility exercises can minimise the risk of tendon, muscle or ligamentous injuries. Do strengthening exercises first, followed by balance exercises to minimise the risk of injurious falls, and lastly, stamina exercises if the person is able to tolerate this. By and large, walking or a slow jog for 20 to 30 minutes 3 to 5 times a week is good enough.”

But those with certain conditions should beware the kind of exercise they choose: Heart disease patients should avoid strenuous exercise and osteoporosis patients must avoid falls. This means that activities like trekking are not ideal.

What you feed your body is critical, so pay attention to your diet.

Dr Sitoh stresses the importance of a balanced diet, with certain adjustments: Avoiding or rationing simple carbohydrates for diabetes patients,

restricting the salt intake of those with hypertension.

## KEEPING AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN LIFE

According to the book, *Successful Aging: The MacArthur Foundation Study* by John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, the elderly may feel that ageing is about letting go of life, and as their friends die, they stop working and their children go their own ways.

But increasingly, studies have shown that those who age well continue to connect with and embrace life, from maintaining a close social network of friends and family, finding new passions, volunteering and grandparenting to pursuing new hobbies.

\*From the book *Successful Aging: The MacArthur Foundation Study* by John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn.

