

Obesity contributing to health risks, economic burden

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There is no magic pill to address obesity, and people have to adopt healthy eating habits, exercise daily and get proper rest to achieve their optimum weight.

PETALING JAYA: Obesity is a very serious problem in Malaysia, and despite the best efforts of the Health Ministry, nothing much has changed over the years.

Even worse, obesity is presenting a huge economic burden to the country, as the latest 2020 report from the ministry and the World Health Organisation (WHO) revealed.

It said, "non-communicable diseases (NCD), particularly cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and cancer, cost the economy RM8.91 billion, or about 0.65% of the gross domestic product (GDP)".

The economic cost was estimated from the loss in productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism in the workplace and premature deaths in the working-age population.

Aside from productivity losses, NCD place a serious health burden resulting from disability and loss of healthy life years, which is known as “the burden of disease costs”.

This is an intangible cost that is estimated at RM100.79 billion, equivalent to 7.35% of GDP.

According to WHO’s 2018 data, coronary heart disease-related deaths in Malaysia reached 34,766 or 24.69% of total deaths.

Heart disease is the nation’s number one killer, and one in four deaths is attributed to it.

Commenting on this, Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Koh Kar Chai said only by promoting awareness can the country deal with obesity.

He said Malaysians need to watch their waistlines and adjust their dietary habits.

“There is no magic pill to cure obesity. It takes lifestyle changes to see results. Malaysians have to adopt healthy eating habits, exercise daily and get proper rest to lose weight.

“Malaysians must be aware of the many diseases linked to obesity, which can be difficult and expensive to treat,” he said.

Koh pointed out that the cost to treat these preventable diseases is increasing yearly, and that there had been no improvement despite many awareness campaigns to promote a healthy lifestyle.

He said it is difficult for the country to support the health burden posed by NCD, and that the level of morbidity is high.

Former health deputy minister Dr Lee Boon Chye said Malaysia has the highest obesity rate in Asia, with some 54% of adult Malaysians being obese. Sedentary lifestyles and bad eating habits are the main causes.

“If employees are encouraged to be healthy, it will benefit employers as workers will be less prone to falling ill.

“The healthier the employee, the more productive he will be. This also contributes to lowering a company’s group insurance premiums as fewer workers will get NCD.”

The ministry has been promoting a healthy life from primary school up to adulthood, and Malaysians need to realise that with an unhealthy population, health costs will go up.

“Not only will people miss work, which will have an economic impact, but the ministry will need to look after them in the long term, which affects the country.”