

**HEAR YE, HEAR YE**

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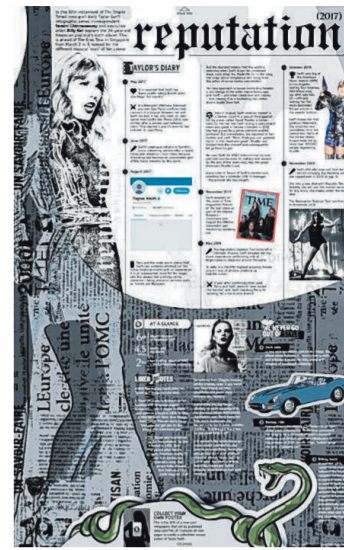
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# life

**REPUTATION**

The "era" when Taylor Swift proved she was far from Delicate | C4



**Being fit and healthy lets me enjoy life more. I also like to eat and, with more muscle mass, I have better metabolism.**



**MS DIANA CHIN (right)**, who underwent knee-preservation surgery at Singapore General Hospital in 2022

ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

# KNEE SURGERY ON THE RISE

**As Singapore's population ages, more older people find sports and physical activity important to their quality of life**



**Akshita Nanda**  
Correspondent

When knee pain stopped Ms Diana Chin from enjoying her regular weight-training regimen at the gym, the 64-year-old educator was eager for options to get back on her feet.

After trying physiotherapy and pain patches to no avail, she opted for knee preservation surgery at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) in 2022.

The operation realigned the bones in her leg to reduce the load on her knee joint and, within two months, she was back at the gym doing low-impact exercises.

It took a year for her to stop limping and be completely pain-free, but Ms Chin says she is more active now than she was before. She is back to doing deadlifts, weighted squats and leg presses at the gym. She has taken up gardening, which requires her to bend and squat. She also did the challenging Ulsanbawi Rock hiking trail while on holiday in South Korea in October 2023.

"Being fit and healthy lets me enjoy life more," says Ms Chin. "I also like to eat and, with more muscle mass, I have better metabolism."

Doctors say more Singaporeans are opting for knee surgery to keep exercising even in the later years of life.

Knee operations may involve total or partial knee replacements, in which implants are used to replace parts of the knee joint which have been damaged by osteoarthritis. These implants last for at least 10 years in over 90 per cent of cases.

Then there are knee preservation operations that maintain the original knee through repairing a torn meniscus, or regenerating cartilage or reshaping the leg bones to address malalignment.

At Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), 760 knee replacement operations were performed in

2023, up from 670 in 2022. Over 90 per cent of these were total knee replacements, with the median age of patients being 68.

TTSH performed around 65 knee preservation operations in 2023, up from around 50 in 2022, according to Adjunct Assistant Professor Kelvin Tan Guoping, a senior consultant and the hospital's head of service (adult reconstruction).

Dr Tan says there has been an increase in the number of knee replacements and knee preservation operations over the years, except during the pandemic, when such operations were considered non-urgent and postponed.

In 2023, SGH did over 2,000 total knee replacements, about 50 more than the year before.

Associate Professor Jerry Chen Yongqiang, consultant at SGH's department of orthopaedic surgery, says demand for knee-related operations is growing for a number of reasons.

The population is ageing and people are more aware of their treatment options.

"Our population is also more active, so there's a higher risk of high impact to the joint, leading to knee damage," he says, adding that many patients seek surgery to return to an active life.

"More and more patients want to play tennis and golf or go hiking and diving on holidays. The goal is to bring them back to a healthier lifestyle."

**OSTEOARTHRITIS AND KNEE DAMAGE**

Knee surgery may be recommended for patients with osteoarthritis, which can wear away at the cartilage that supports the bones in the joints, leading to pain and difficulty in walking.

Eleven per cent of the population in Singapore could have knee osteoarthritis, according to studies published in 2016 and 2018.

Older people are at higher risk of osteoarthritis, as are women, and those with gout or obesity.

Previous injuries or fractures also increase one's risk of developing osteoarthritis.

For example, in March 2023, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung had a partial knee replacement to address right knee pain arising from an injury sustained more than a decade ago, when he tore his meniscus while playing football in a labour union tournament.

The knee joint has three compartments and osteoarthritis may affect one (unicompartmental) or

all three (tricompartamental). Different operations are recommended, depending on the number of compartments affected and the severity of the osteoarthritis.

Ms Chin, for example, was happy to be found suitable for a knee preservation surgery called proximal fibular osteotomy, in which her leg's bones were adjusted to redistribute weight across the knee joint.

While some of her peers have gone for knee replacements, she says the knee preservation route appealed since the surgery time was shorter and left a smaller scar.

Dr Lee Kong Hwee, senior consultant at SGH's department of orthopaedic surgery, says knee preservation operations are often preferred by patients who do not want metal implants in their bodies. These operations are also more suitable for those with conditions such as dermatitis, poor immunity or poorly controlled diabetes.

He adds: "With knee preservation surgery, there's also the option to go for total knee replacement later on. It's about giving patients more choice."

Dr Tan of TTSH has seen an increase in the number of patients who opted for knee preservation surgery. He adds: "They are often active individuals who are seeking to improve their knee pain to allow them to maintain their sporting lifestyle for as long as possible."

Knee replacements may be recommended in cases of more severe osteoarthritis, which cannot be addressed through physiotherapy or other means.

Partial knee replacements might be recommended for people aged 40 and older, who have partial joint damage. Total knee replacements might be recommended for those over the age of 60 with severe osteoarthritis that limits their daily activities.

CONTINUED on C2



# Low-impact sports for staying active

FROM C1

Mr Simon Ng, 49, tore a knee ligament in secondary school, but continued to play futsal and badminton for two hours every week for years without issue.

Then, in 2020, his left knee began to ache.

"I would feel the pain even if I didn't play sports, even if I walked for 10 minutes," recalls Mr Ng, who works in an information technology company.

In 2023, he had a partial knee replacement. Within a couple of weeks, the married father of a teenager was able to walk without assistance.

He no longer plays high-impact sports, but has started going to the gym more frequently. "I want to stay healthy and active," he says. "If I go through a period when I don't exercise, I feel sluggish."

## PROTECTING THE KNEE

As the population of Singapore ages and is encouraged to stay more active, will the demand for knee operations continue to rise? Not necessarily, doctors say.

While there will be some increased demand, there are various ways to reduce the risk of developing osteoarthritis and requiring knee surgery.

Dr Chen of SGH says low-impact sports such as cycling and swimming are good options to stay active and reduce the load on the knee. Physiotherapy focusing on muscles, such as the quadriceps and hamstrings, can also be beneficial.

Dr Tan of TTSH says staying active will strengthen one's core muscles and reduce the risk of obesity which, in turn, reduces the risk of developing osteoarthritis.

"The key here is to avoid being obese and avoid injuries to the knees, so exercise safely and keep your weight under control," he adds.



Mr Shoo How Beng, 72, had a total knee replacement in 2020 and now enjoys playing pickleball. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

He says those with significant knee injuries should seek medical advice on the risks and benefits of arthroscopic "key-hole" surgery to repair or reconstruct damaged soft tissues. "These damages can lead to earlier onset osteoarthritis even if they have decided to give up sports participation," he says.

Staying physically active is important to Mr Shoo How Beng, a 72-year-old mentor coach, who finds that exercise counteracts the effects of sitting for long periods at work. He enjoys playing sports with friends and used to play badminton regularly, despite the occasional pain in his right knee.

He also used to go for a 10km jog once a week until the knee pain became more severe in 2019.

On three occasions, the knee "clicked" and left him unable to walk for half an hour.

He had total knee replacement surgery at SGH in 2020 and now plays pickleball – another racket sport – instead of badminton. He has also reduced his jogs to 3km once a week.

"To stay healthy, you need to exercise," he says.



Three months after a partial knee replacement in 2023, Mr Simon Ng was able to go on holiday in Japan. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SIMON NG

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## How to exercise when it feels impossible

NEW YORK – Everyone has been there. You set a goal to exercise regularly, but when the moment comes to get moving, your mind unleashes a torrent of excuses.

These mental blocks may explain why it is so hard to keep a New Year's resolution for longer than four months. So, how do you cut through them?

The first step, experts say, is to stop thinking of them as "excuses".

Just using that word can suggest you failed and should feel bad about your willpower. Research has shown that self-criticism and shame can stop you from meeting your goals, said Katy Milkman, a behavioural scientist at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *How To Change*.

Instead, reframe the reasons you are not exercising as genuine obstacles and devise a plan to overcome them, Milkman said. "Most of us don't just need a goal," she said, but specific steps and strategies to follow.

Experts in exercise science and psychology share their best advice for conquering the reasons people struggle to build an exercise habit.

### 'I HAVE NO TIME'

If you face a jam-packed daily schedule, try starting small, said Ms Kate Baird, an exercise physiologist at the Hospital for Special

Surgery in New York.

Instead of carving out 30 to 60 minutes several times a week, plan several short bursts of movement throughout the day. "If you're not able to do much, doing anything is going to be helpful in so many ways," she said.

For example, walk a few laps around the block during lunch, she said, or sneak in a series of squats between meetings. Ideally, you want these bursts to add up to the recommended 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity and 30 to 60 minutes of full-body strength training a week.

Or you could multitask. Try walking or using a resistance band while on a phone call or watching TV, she said.

If you want to have a dedicated workout window, Ms Baird recommended taking a hard look at your calendar and asking yourself: Is there anything that could go or anything you could trade for a dose of movement? Could you experiment with setting your alarm 30 minutes earlier?

### 'I FEEL SELF-CONSCIOUS'

If the thought of working out in front of other people makes you want to crawl into a hole, know that you have options, said Ms Kelly Roberts, a running coach and body-positive fitness influencer in

New York City.

"The gym is a really intimidating space, even for experienced exercisers," she added.

For some people, a solution might be exercising at home. But for others, Ms Roberts recommended taking a few steps to combat feelings of self-consciousness.

First, remind yourself why you are there, whether it is to feel stronger or to train for a race. Reconnecting with your goal can help to shore you up, she said.

Second, designate a friend or family member whom you can text in the moment, who can support you when you are feeling vulnerable.

Third, try a different gym, class

or group. If a space makes you feel uncomfortable in your own skin, it is okay to leave, Ms Roberts said. "Some spaces are more welcoming than others," she added.

### 'I DON'T WANT TO SPEND MONEY'

You do not need a fancy gym to get fit, said Mr Grayson Wickham, a physical therapist in New York City. "There's so much you can do just with body weight," he said. "It's pretty amazing."

Planks, push-ups, lunges, squats and pointers can all build strength, and regular stretching can cultivate flexibility.

For aerobic exercise, you can do jumping jacks or consider spending a few dollars on a jump rope.

If you have access to a safe outdoor space, you can walk, run or strength-train outside and get the added benefit of spending time in nature, Mr Wickham said. For expert guidance, download a free workout app.

### 'I DON'T HAVE THE SPACE'

If you have room for a yoga mat, you have enough space to get in a great workout, said Dr Edward Phillips, an associate professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School.

"You can get stronger and in better shape and more flexible" in just a few square metres, he said, as long as you can comfortably move your arms and legs without bumping into a wall or furniture.

Beyond doing yoga, you could jump rope, do body-weight exercises, lift dumbbells or kettlebells, stretch or use resistance bands, Mr Wickham said.

If exercising in close quarters feels too claustrophobic, consider an outdoor space that you can make your gym, he said.

### 'I'M IN PAIN'

It might seem counterintuitive, but for those who struggle with forms of chronic muscle or joint discomfort – such as lower back pain, neck pain, or pain from osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis – physical activity is likely to help

make it better, Dr Phillips said.

If you live with chronic pain of any kind and want to be more active, talk to a doctor or an expert in exercise science who can guide you on the safest and most effective movements for your condition.

### 'I'M EXHAUSTED ALL THE TIME'

When even the word "exercise" makes you feel tired, experts recommend meeting your body where it is – in a few ways.

"I think the first practical way to approach this is to ask yourself, are you working out at the best time of the day, or best time of the week, for your energy?," Ms Baird said.

If you know that you have the most energy first thing in the morning and generally feel wiped out in the late afternoon, try working out early in the day.

If getting started feels like a hurdle, Dr Kelly McGonigal, a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University, recommended beginning with a mini workout designed to boost your state of mind.

Exercising for the length of "one song is great, because a song will change your mood," she said. "Do something that reminds you that it feels good to move."

Remember that exercise does not have to be intense for it to count, experts say. Stretching, yoga, pilates, walking and jogging at a conversational pace are all great options. And, finally, do what you can to ensure you are getting enough sleep.

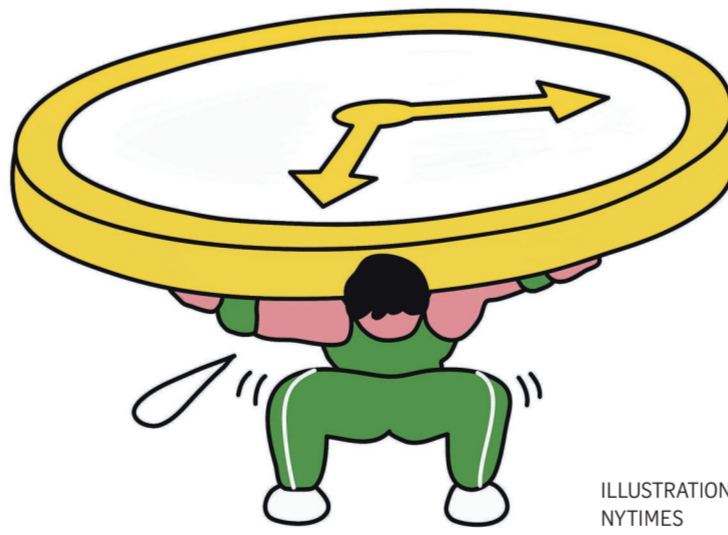


ILLUSTRATION: NYTIMES

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