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Living Well Use or lose your muscles



Being sedentary, especially during the pandemic, can lead to the loss of muscle mass and function. Experts share ways to prevent it



Amrita Kaur

At the start of the year, Mr Lim H.L. wrote down one goal – to lose at least 5kg this year.

Then Covid-19 struck and gyms were shut during the circuit breaker from April to June.

The 31-year-old account executive “lost all motivation” to get active. Lacking the discipline to join an online workout class, he “moved around minimally” and spent much of his free time binge-watching Netflix shows.

“Everything was extremely convenient – moving from the bed to my work desk and to the living room – that was how I lived for many months, especially when we were advised not to leave our homes unnecessarily,” said Mr Lim, who now works alternate weeks from home.

Like him, many people have reduced their daily physical activities due to restrictions brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. But doctors warn that underusing one’s muscles may have serious consequences.

Dr Lau Pik Onn, a senior resident physician at private medical clinic Icon Health Screening, said: “The reduction in physical activity and movement during the pandemic, especially in adults and seniors, can lead to the loss of muscle mass and function, a condition called sarcopenia.”

Dr Leong Choon Kit, a family physician at Mission Medical Clinic in Serangoon, said that lately, he has seen more elderly patients suffering from a loss of muscle mass.

He said: “I think the circumstances limiting the movement of the elderly, their families restricting them for fear of them contracting Covid-19 and their own fear of catching the virus, all have a part to play in causing inactivity and the loss of muscle mass.”

While losing muscle is part of ageing, it also affects people who have a sedentary lifestyle or are physically inactive for an extended period of time.

If a muscle is not used, the body will eventually break it down to conserve energy, explained Dr Lau.

Signs of muscle mass loss include fatigue and a drop in energy levels, a slower walking speed, decreased strength, general weakness and frequent falls.

A weaker hand grip, such as difficulty opening a jar, can also be a sign of progressive loss of muscle mass.

The condition can affect a person’s balance, gait and daily tasks, such as walking, climbing the stairs and lifting objects.

Dr Lau said studies have shown that people start to lose muscle mass from as early as 40 years old, with a drop of about 8 per cent of muscle mass every decade. The rate almost doubles to 15 per cent every decade after age 70.

Mr Rethinam Ganesan, a senior physiotherapist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, said that while people above age 40 have a higher rate of muscle mass loss, those below 40 should also be concerned.

“Prevention should commence

before the onset of muscle mass loss. Early prevention reduces the risk of falls and fractures. It also increases the lifespan and improves the quality of life of an individual,” he said.

Muscle mass loss could also be the result of a poor diet and lowered sex hormones, such as low oestrogen during menopause and low testosterone during andropause.

Dr Lau said it is important to eat a balanced diet with adequate protein and vitamin D, and to avoid sugary and processed food.

“Protein provides the building blocks for muscle and stimulates its growth, while low vitamin D has been associated with a higher risk of sarcopenia,” she said.

Foods rich in protein include eggs, meat, cheese, yogurt, nuts, beans and legumes.

“One should aim for 1.2g of protein for every 1kg of body weight, especially the elderly,” added Dr Lau.

Besides the loss of muscle mass, a lack of exercise and physical movement can also lead to other health problems.

Associate Professor Reshma Merchant of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore said a sedentary lifestyle can impair glucose tolerance and reduce insulin sensitivity, which may lead to chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and metabolic syndrome.

COMBAT MUSCLE LOSS continued on C2

Five tips to prevent loss of muscle mass

1 KEEP MOVING: Physical activity is important. Stand up, stretch and walk about in the office and at home frequently.

2 STRENGTH TRAINING: Do this at least twice a week for 15 minutes each time. You can lift weights or do pull-ups, push-ups and sit-ups. You can also use resistance bands.

3 AEROBIC EXERCISE: Do at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity a week, such as brisk walking, cycling and using the stairs.

4 BALANCED DIET: Eat a diet with sufficient vegetables and fresh fruit. Have enough protein, such as yogurt, eggs, lean meat and beans. Avoid eating processed and sugary foods.

5 VITAMIN D: Low vitamin D levels are associated with a higher risk of sarcopenia, or the loss of muscle mass and function. Spend time outdoors because the sun is one of the best sources of this nutrient. Fatty fish, eggs and fortified cereals are also good sources of vitamin D.

• Source: Dr Lau Pik Onn, senior resident physician at private medical clinic Icon Health Screening

Tan Tock Seng Hospital physiotherapist Nicolette Ng, guided by the hospital’s senior physiotherapist Rethinam Ganesan, showing a forward lunge, an exercise that can help prevent the loss of muscle mass. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Combat muscle loss

FROM C1

Dr Chan Kin Ming, a geriatric specialist at Chan KM Geriatric & Medical Clinic, said people who are not eating well or meeting their nutritional requirements through food can consider taking a supplement that contains beta-hydroxy-beta-methylbutyrate, also known as HMB.

HMB is a leucine metabolite that helps to counteract muscle loss. It is naturally produced in small amounts when the body breaks down leucine, an essential amino acid that can be obtained from foods such as milk, Greek yogurt, soya beans, beef and chicken.

"It slows muscle breakdown and supports the building, repairing and protection of muscle tissue. While HMB is found in our body, the level declines with age," said Dr Chan.

Foods such as avocado and cauliflower contain small amounts of HMB, but getting enough HMB through food alone can be challenging, he added.

Physical exercise, both strength training and cardiovascular, is also important to maintain muscle health and strength.

Strength and resistance training exercise, at least twice a week, is the most effective way to prevent muscle loss, said Dr Lau.

This includes weightlifting, pulling against resistance bands or moving part of the body against gravity, such as climbing the stairs and doing leg presses, or extending the knees against resistance on a weight machine.



EASY WORK: Tan Tock Seng Hospital physiotherapist Nicolette Ng demonstrating simple moves to prevent the loss of muscle mass, such as wall push-ups (above) and heel raises (below). ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN



Going for a stroll after a meal is much better than watching TV on a couch. Everyone should be concerned about muscle wasting. What we don't use will be taken away from us.

”

DR LEONG CHHOON KIT, a family physician at Mission Medical Clinic in Serangoon

Said Mr Ganesan: "When a person engages in a routine strengthening exercise regimen, it helps to provide a constant challenge to achieve muscle growth or maintenance, preventing the occurrence of muscle loss."

Daily physical activities like doing household chores can help maintain muscle mass as well, he noted.

Aerobic exercises such as walking, cycling and jogging also work. Dr Leong said the loss of muscle mass is typically associated with the underuse of muscles.

"Going for a stroll after a meal is much better than watching TV on a couch. Everyone should be concerned about muscle wasting. What we don't use will be taken away from us," he said.

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HOT BODS

Text and photos by Chong Jun Liang



Yvonne Tay, 30
Fitness instructor

HEIGHT 159cm WEIGHT 55kg

EXERCISE ROUTINE I do home workouts such as bodyweight exercises and high-intensity interval training twice or thrice a week, and I do static cycling, or spinning, at the gym on other days of the week.

DIET Seventy per cent of my diet consists of clean eating, with brown rice and unprocessed food. For the other 30 per cent, I eat anything I want. This is a more sustainable lifestyle than a completely clean diet.



Walter Tay, 32
Food-and-beverage business owner

HEIGHT 182cm WEIGHT 85kg

EXERCISE ROUTINE I exercise six times a week and do a variety to keep my workouts interesting. I do upper body training, such as archer push-ups, pike push-ups, bench presses, cable fly and free weights. For leg exercises, I do pistol squats and climb the stairs with a weighted vest. Swimming is my main form of cardiovascular exercise.

DIET I keep it simple and eat less meat. Brown rice, tofu and beans are my staples. I let loose once a week by eating ice cream, nuts and chocolate in moderation.

Fit & Fab

Ditching her career for martial arts

Rose Canda quit her job in interior design to become an instructor after falling in love with kali, a traditional martial arts form from the Philippines

Amrita Kaur

What is your secret to looking fabulous?
Having an attitude of gratitude, good sleep, drinking enough water, exercising and smiling.

Has there ever been a time when you were not fit and fab?
Yes, when I was in my early 30s.

I ran a lot and did not have the appetite to eat. I ended up losing a lot of weight and was too skinny.

What is your diet like?
I am a vegan. I eat whole foods such as fruit, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds. I consume brown rice, potatoes and corn.

What are your indulgences?
Pizza, dark chocolate, vegan ice cream and brownies.

How do you maintain a healthy work-life balance?
I think it's important to accept that there is no perfect work-life balance. Prioritising my time, setting work hours, sticking to them and allocating time to exercise are important to maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

What are the three most important things in your life?
Mental health, family and friends, and purpose and passion.

What's your favourite and least favourite part of your body?
I don't have a favourite or least favourite. I train hard to achieve the physique I have today.

What I love most is that my body is my own, I love that it's different from anyone else's and it allows me to do so many things I love.

What are your must-dos before and after a workout?
A pre-workout meal is very important. I have to fuel my body to have the energy for the whole training. I also do a proper warm-up before starting my workout.

After training, a must-have drink is a plant-based protein smoothie with greens to help strengthen the muscle fibres, and refuel and repair the muscles. A good 10 minutes of stretching after the workout is a must.

How important is it for you to keep up with your fitness routine?
It is very important. There are days

when I don't feel like training but I train anyway. It helps me feel good and revs up my energy levels and helps improve my mood.

How are you keeping fit during this period?
Having enough rest, maintaining a balanced diet and exercising have been part of my lifestyle even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

What are the changes you have made to keep exercising during this time?
During the circuit breaker when all gyms were closed, I trained at home. I converted one of the rooms to a mini dojo (a room where martial arts is practised) where I spent most of my days training on my own or with friends via video-conferencing platform Zoom and teaching kids online.

I invested in resistance bands to add to my weights equipment and I couldn't be happier with the results.

How has your active lifestyle influenced your family and friends?
My friends have said I have motivated them to stay positive, given them ideas on how to stay fit, for example, during the circuit breaker, and reminded them that

fitness is about making gradual improvement and not comparisons.

What's the most extreme thing you have done in the name of fitness?
Attending training camps, but I would not call it extreme as it benefits and complements my learning, understanding and knowledge about kali.

How extensive is your collection of sports-related paraphernalia?
It is moderate. I have boxing gloves, mixed martial arts gloves and weapons I use for kali.

Would you go for plastic surgery?
No. For me it's just not something I would ever seriously consider. I respect those who choose to undergo it. If you feel that plastic surgery would increase your confidence or the quality of your life, then go for it.

Do you think you're sexy?
Hell, yeah! Knowing what I am passionate about and being able to share my passion without forcing it upon people; sharing it as joy and excitement is a very sexy thing.

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Martial arts instructor Rose Canda started learning kali in 2012. She became an instructor six years later. PHOTO: TAN ZU DE

Bio Box

ROSE CANDI
AGE 45
HEIGHT 1.62m
WEIGHT 55kg

When Ms Candi came across Kali Majapahit, a South-east Asian martial arts school in Singapore, she was "ecstatic".

Kali is one of the terms used to refer to the traditional martial arts in the Philippines, her home country. "I had wanted to learn this art as it is part of my culture," she said.

The school, which has branches in Clarke Quay and Upper Serangoon, imparts knowledge and skills through a combination of various martial arts such as kali, silat, muay thai, kung fu and boxing, and even includes parkour.

In 2012, she began her journey in learning kali - which emphasises fighting with sticks, bladed weapons and various improvised weapons, as well as "open-hand" techniques without weapons.

She enjoyed it so much that she quit her job as a senior interior designer in 2018 and joined the school as a full-time martial arts instructor.

Ms Candi, who has been in

Fitness routine

Day	Activities
Monday	• 1.5hr weight training • 1hr 10min martial arts
Tuesday	• 1.5hr weight and cardio training • 1hr 10min martial arts
Wednesday	• 1.5hr weight training • 1hr 10min martial arts
Thursday	• 1.5hr weight training • 1hr boxing
Friday	• 30min high intensity interval training
Saturday	• Rest
Sunday	• 30min low-impact training

Source: ROSE CANDI STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Singapore for 18 years, said: "I like interior designing, but it came to a point where I felt stressed and found no purpose in what I did. I became passionate about being a part of a community that helps others to become the best version of themselves through martial arts."

Now, Ms Candi, who has a second-degree black belt, teaches martial arts to children and adults. "I do not see it as a job. It is what I believe in and it has been rewarding to see children unlock their potential and reach their goals with confidence," she said.

ASK THE EXPERTS

Managed with care

Dr Lim Kar Seng, consultant dermatologist and medical director from The Dermatology Practice, shares how the common skin condition psoriasis affects the body and treatments for it



I am male, over 50 years old, and have red flaky skin patches on my elbows, knees and scalp. What are they?

The rash is a condition called psoriasis. Your skin may feel inflamed and look scaly and raised. Sometimes, the skin may even crack or bleed. Psoriasis can usually be diagnosed by physical examination without the need for blood tests or biopsy.

About 10 per cent of patients with psoriasis have a family history of the condition, which signifies that it may be caused by genetics. Other than that, there is no known cause although certain factors such as alcohol, stress, a bad sore throat may precipitate or worsen it.

Certain medications such as antimalarial drugs and beta blockers may also exacerbate psoriasis.

What causes the rash? Is it due to poor hygiene or a fungal infection, and is it contagious?

Contrary to popular belief, psoriasis is not due to poor hygiene. It is also not an infection, so it's not contagious and cannot be spread by physical contact. Common areas of the body affected include the knees and shins, elbows, buttocks, navel and scalp. The rash usually thickens over the affected areas and starts to flake off. This reflects a disorder in the underlying mechanism of the skin where the skin cells multiply too fast, resulting in a thick rash.

Apart from skin, it can also affect nails, causing 'pits' that look like small holes on the nail surface, yellowish spots

under the nails and thickened nails that may resemble a fungal infection. Psoriasis also affects the joints of 10 to 15 per cent of patients, resulting in pain, swelling and joint deformities. Recent studies over the last decade have also shown that patients with severe psoriasis have a higher chance of developing hypertension, diabetes and cholesterol issues as well.

Psoriasis is often confused with eczema, another common skin condition that causes itching and rashes. However, unlike eczema, psoriasis may extend beyond the skin.

How can psoriasis be treated? What types of treatment are available?

Fortunately, there are many treatment options available. They include topical creams and lotions, UV light treatment, oral medications and biologic drug injections. Most often, a combination of these treatments will be more effective in reducing the symptoms. Clinical work in psoriasis treatments is at the cutting edge of dermatology research, and there are newer, safer and more effective treatments emerging every few years.

You can also make some changes to your lifestyle by cutting down on alcohol, and reducing stress triggers to better manage the condition. By doing so, psoriasis patients can still maintain a good quality of life as those without.

A PUBLIC DISEASE AWARENESS INITIATIVE SUPPORTED BY ABBVIE

Psoriasis is a skin condition that causes build up of skin cells under the surface, resulting in red, scaly patches on different parts of the body. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



DR LIM KAR SENG Consultant Dermatologist & Medical Director, The Dermatology Practice

Find out your muscle age



Muscle strength is an important indicator of one's overall health. Healthcare company Abbott has launched a muscle age calculator.

Muscle age reflects the strength and performance of muscles in the lower limbs and is calculated based on the five-times sit-to-stand test, which matches results with age groups.

Find out how "old" your muscles are with this test:

1 CHOOSE A SUITABLE CHAIR: The height of the chair seat should be about 43cm.

2 TIME YOURSELF DOING THE CHALLENGE: Sit to stand on both legs five times, with arms folded, as fast as you can.

3 ENTER YOUR DETAILS IN THE MUSCLE AGE CALCULATOR AT STAND4STRENGTH.SG: Indicate your age, gender and sit-to-stand time.

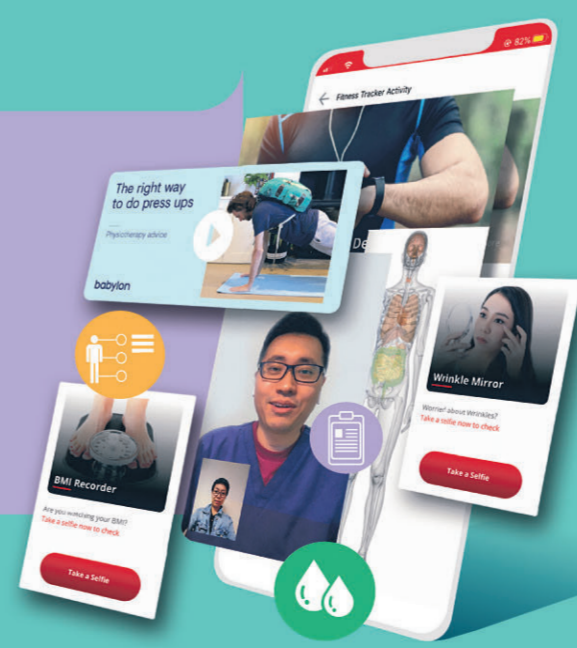
Your results will indicate the age of your muscles. For example, for those aged 65 and above, a score of 12 seconds or more may be a sign of possible sarcopenia, or the loss of muscle mass and function, according to the report Asian Working Group For Sarcopenia: 2019 Consensus Update On Sarcopenia Diagnosis And Treatment, published this year.

Amrita Kaur

Tan Tock Seng Hospital physiotherapist Nicolette Ng showing the sit-to-stand exercise. ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

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