



**MY FITNESS JOURNEY**  
 Writer Amrita Kaur discovers the joy of exercise | **C2**

# life

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The Life List

# 15 things to do for a healthier 2023

Planning walks or exercises with loved ones will help you stay accountable and hit your activity goals. PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO

Try simple tips like eating without your phone or standing during your commute



**Akshita Nanda**  
 Correspondent

Looking to be healthier in 2023? The Straits Times asked more than a dozen experts in health and fitness for their advice. Here are their lifestyle hacks to get you eating better, moving more and sleeping better.

**EAT BETTER**

The top recommendations from dietitians and nutrition experts are to consume less salt, sugar and saturated fats, and to get more fibre. This is how to start.

**1** If you like packaged drinks, choose those with Nutri-Grade label A or B, says Ms Alvernia Chua, senior dietitian at Ang Mo Kio Poly-clinic, which is under the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics. From Friday, the new Nutri-Grade mark will help consumers identify healthier packaged drinks, from Grade A being the lowest in sugar and saturated fat content to Grade D being the highest. Even some bubble tea chains have started incorporating the Nutri-Grade label to help you make healthier choices.

**2** Order salads as side dishes and eat fruit for dessert. This is an easy way to add more fibre to your diet, says Ms Chu.

**3** Salt is not the only way to flavour your food. Ms Alefia A. Vasana-



Instead of using the phone or watching television while scarfing down a meal, focus on the eating experience.

wala, principal dietitian at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, suggests adding herbs and spices instead.

"Use herbs and spices like ginger, garlic, mint, parsley, onions, cloves, and cardamom to flavour sauces, gravies and curries," she says.

**4** Are you eating too fast? Ms Chua says you should eat mindfully, chewing food thoroughly and not rushing through meals. It takes 20 minutes for satiety signals to reach the brain, and eating quicker can lead to eating more. Instead of using the phone or watching television while scarfing down a meal, she suggests focusing on the eating experience, which can include placing your cutlery down between bites, taking sips of water and maybe even conversing with a companion.

**5** Social media is flooded with diet trends that promise weight

loss and health outcomes. Ignore them and look for qualified health practitioners to help you, says nutritionist Felicia Koh, who runs The Whole Health Practice with her husband, health coach Alastair Hunt.

Mr Hunt agrees. "Everyone is unique. Health goals shared with your contemporaries may be similar, but your path to achieve them can differ enormously." Adds Ms Koh: "Focus on your health and vitality, support your body with the nutrition that it needs."

**6** Do not sit or lie down immediately after a meal. Ms Lua Chong Ying, senior dietitian at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's (TSSH) department of nutrition and dietetics, suggests light exercise instead. "Walking can help muscle cells better uptake glucose, prevent blood sugar level spikes and lower blood sugar levels after meals," she says.

**MOVE MORE**

The Singapore Physical Activity Guidelines were revised in June to reduce sedentary behaviour and encourage residents to clock at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity a week.

**7** If that target seems daunting, Dr Grace Huang, general practitioner at DTAP Clinic, says aiming for 8,000 steps a day could be an easier achievement for people looking to increase their physical activity. "A higher daily step count has benefits like decreasing cardiovascular risk or risk of diabetes, and even risk of dementia," she adds.

How can you clock 8,000 steps a day? Ms Irene Chu, senior physiotherapist at Singapore General Hospital (SGH), suggests planning regular walks with loved ones.

Ms Chu and Dr Tan Ken Ji, orthopaedic surgeon at Mount Elizabeth

Novena Hospital, both recommend shopping in person to help raise one's daily step count.

Dr Tan says: "Fun fact - going grocery shopping once a week for a year is equivalent to walking a marathon."

It can also help to strengthen one's muscles and bones.

**8** Exercise with other people as accountability can help you stick to your activity goals. Mr Julien Bera, country director of Virgin Active Singapore, says joining group classes for yoga, pilates, cycling or high-intensity interval training can create a supportive community that also improves one's social well-being.

Investing in a health tracker can also help one stay accountable. Ms Ivy Lai, country manager of Philips Singapore, says that according to the company's research, 59 per cent of respondents surveyed agreed that having access to personal health technology and devices would prompt them to take action to better care for their health.

**9** With all this moving around, it is also important to stretch regularly. Dr Tan says: "Stretching can help to improve flexibility and increase the range of motion in your joints. It can also decrease the risk for injury and keep your muscles healthy and strong. The best part is, you can stretch anywhere and at any time - when watching television, at work. The possibilities are endless."

A simple change you could make is standing during your commute, adds Ms Chu. "Standing for your ride can be a welcome change for your legs, especially if you have spent the whole day sitting in the office," she says.

CONTINUED ON C2

# My fitness journey started with a body fat reading of 36%

Though slightly underweight, I had to watch my diet and do some strength training

Amrita Kaur

When I did a body composition test as part of a health check-up in April, I got a rude shock.

The nurse who facilitated the procedure also seemed confused by the reading. So much so she thought there was something wrong with the machine and repeated the test.

My body fat percentage was above the ideal range at 36 per cent. This was an anomaly because I am slightly underweight and, to most people, I look skinny.

A body fat range of 20 per cent to 32 per cent for women and 10 per cent to 22 per cent for men is considered satisfactory for good health, according to the American College of Sports Medicine.

My muscle mass was also low at 18kg, compared with the normal range of 24.4kg to 29.8kg.

The skinny girl who did not bother counting calories and drank bubble tea multiple times a week had to change her ways, watch her diet and do some resistance and weight training, as advised by the nurse.

Someone in the normal weight range can have a high percentage of fat mass and a low amount of muscle mass, which results in the term "skinny fat". This is also known as normal-weight obesity.

I was skinny fat and I needed to do something about it.

Well before the test, I had contemplated engaging a personal trainer in January. The results reaffirmed my decision to hire one.

I had been working from home for over two years and was leading a relatively sedentary lifestyle. I ate an extra meal between lunch and dinner, often a fattening one, thinking it would be fine since I was underweight and wanted to



Writer Amrita Kaur doing a shoulder fly exercise at Bishan ActiveSG Gym. She now works out at the gym twice a week. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

pile on a few kilos.

But I started experiencing unwelcome changes in my body: panting while climbing the overhead bridge; arms aching from carrying slightly heavy grocery bags.

I wanted to exercise and feel stronger, but I did not know where to start. I went for jogs, but they did not feel like they were helping much. What I needed was some-

one to guide me in becoming active, especially since I wanted to start strength training.

It was obvious where my fats were lurking, so I told my trainer I wanted to get rid of them at my belly and thighs, and work on toning the rest of my body.

I was told I cannot choose where my body loses fat, but I can choose where I want to look more defined.

Research has shown this. A 2011 study published in the Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research found that all 24 participants who completed exercises targeting only the abdominals for six weeks had no reduction in belly fat.

Another study published in the Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics in 2015

which followed 40 overweight and obese women for 12 weeks found that resistance training of the abdominals had no effect on belly fat loss, compared with dietary intervention alone.

After assessing my fitness level, my trainer devised a plan for me to get started on my fitness journey: twice-weekly sessions for six months. I began with bodyweight

exercises before progressing to light and heavier weights.

As quickly as in two weeks, I felt the changes. I did not feel lethargic through the day and had an energy boost. When I progressed to heavier weights, it made me feel that anything was possible as long as I set my mind to it.

Most importantly, when I exercised, I felt a sense of calm. I could clear my mind and be immersed in the moment. And my chronic shoulder pain lessened after weeks of training.

My trainer also made some changes to my diet plan, including the introduction of breakfast, which I hardly used to have.

Diet, to me, was the toughest thing to change. I could work out every day, but would rather have delicious food, which is often unhealthy.

At times, I gave in to my cravings for McDonald's and bubble tea. But I knew that if I wanted to see and experience changes in my body, I had to change my old habits.

At the end of six months, in November, I was on my own. And this was the real test, because I no longer had a trainer to be accountable to.

This is where I am now: I am working out two times a week at the gym and doing high-intensity interval activity once a week. And I am loving every bit of it.

I can gladly say I have fallen in love with exercising and, in particular, strength training.

When I did a body composition test again, the results were more positive. My fat mass fell by 6 percentage points and my muscle mass increased by 3kg.

While I might have reached my fitness goals for the year, I know this journey is a never-ending one. But it is one I now enjoy.

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## The Life List

# Soak up some sun, make time for sleep

FROM C1

**10** Exercising in an air-conditioned gym might be more comfortable, but a bit of sun could help your fitness goals. Dr Sean Ho, consultant in orthopaedic surgery at TTSH, says moderate sun exposure while exercising will boost your vitamin D levels and reduce the risk of osteoporosis. "The recommendation is to get between five and 30 minutes of sun exposure at least twice a week," he adds.

### SLEEP BETTER

**11** Are you making enough time for rest? Dr Leow Leong Chai, director of SGH's sleep disorders unit, says it is important to make

enough time for sleep. Most people need seven to nine hours of sleep a night and should try to sleep and wake at the same time.

A sleep expert from Fitbit Singapore suggests making an 8½-hour window for sleep to take place and creating a wind-down routine that starts at least an hour before attempting to sleep. The routine can include switching off from work e-mail and projects, lowering light and sound levels, and engaging in a calming activity such as reading.

**12** Get your light exposure right as well. "Minimise screen time two hours before bed as nocturnal blue light from devices suppresses melatonin release and prevents sleep initiation," says Dr Leow. Wearing glasses that block blue light can help.

It is also important to get 30 minutes of bright light on waking, for example through exposure to sunlight. "This helps to boost mood, alertness, and function of the body clock, which will also improve nighttime melatonin release and sleep."

**13** Avoid or limit naps. Sleep experts say it is better to avoid napping to sleep better at night. Go for a light walk instead as exercise can help improve sleep quality.

**14** Mr Ken Mok, founder and director of Fiitboxx and Foxx gyms, recommends activities such as stretching, yoga and walking to improve sleep.

He adds: "It is generally okay to work out at any time of day, but I would advise stopping at least 90



Get bright light on waking, and try activities such as stretching to improve sleep. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

minutes before going to bed. This will enable a reduction in heart rate and a return to normal body temperature. To find out what works best for you, try various workout times."

**15** Watch what you eat before bedtime, says Adjunct Assistant Professor Chong Khai Beng, a senior consultant in otorhinolaryngology at TTSH. "If possible, avoid having large meals before bedtime. Minimise nicotine, caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime as well."

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• This is the first of a two-part series. Look out for tips for a mentally healthier 2023 next week.

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