

## Strengthening the immune system

New Straits Times · 18 Mar 2024 · 10 · By Dr Kent L. Bradley The writer is chief health and nutrition officer of Herbalife

OUR immune system has one job — helping our bodies defend and recover from illness. Unhealthy diets high in calories from sugars, meat and dairy products are usually associated with health problems like obesity and metabolic diseases. They can cause a tremendous imbalance in our immune system, thus weakening it.



Regularly eating foods that are not nutritious can break down our immune defence, similar to how invaders can penetrate a damaged fortress. This, can make us more susceptible to new and recurring illnesses.

According to the 2023 World Obesity Atlas report, Malaysia is projected to see a surge in obesity rates among adults and children. By 2035, it is estimated that 41 per cent of adults will be obese. This highlights the urgent need to address dietary habits to strengthen our immune system.

### WHY IS IMMUNITY OUR BEST DEFENCE?

Your body is a well-designed fortress. Every day, it silently defends itself against potential harm through its layered system of defence. It can repair itself when it is challenged. Our cells are like an army of protectors, each with specific roles to play to help our body defend itself. If unsuccessful, they will repair the body when needed.

That is why nutrition is so important. Our cells need nutrients that come in the form of macronutrients, micronutrients and phytonutrients.

Within these three broad categories, we understand the specific importance of protein, healthy essential fats like Omega-3, the power of fibre to support our microbiome, and vitamins, minerals and plant-based nutrients that keep our body in optimal condition.

While nutrient deficiency is rare in developed countries, many people in developing countries do not get enough essential vitamins over a long period of time. In 1976, an eye doctor was working in Indonesia to reduce the number of children going blind because of a deficiency in Vitamin A. He noticed that when these individuals were given Vitamin A, they were also not dying from common infections in the country like measles or diarrhoea.

This led to studies and the eventual recommendation by the World Health Organisation for universal Vitamin A supplementation. The World Bank declared Vitamin A supplementation one of the most cost-effective health interventions.

This shows us that whether it is Vitamins A, D, or C, minerals like magnesium or zinc, or antioxidants from plants or protein — our cells need the right balance of nutrients to do the job.

Consuming a balanced diet with the right vitamins, minerals and nutrients while maintaining a healthy lifestyle is the best way to keep your immune system in tip-top shape.