

Healthy digestion promotes overall wellbeing

New Straits Times · 11 Jun 2024 · 9

DIGESTIVE health is crucial for overall wellbeing, which encompasses everything from nutrient absorption to immune function.



Poor digestive health can lead to stomach pain, bloating, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and gastroesophageal reflux disease.

For youths, maintaining good digestive health supports better energy levels, improved concentration and increased physical activity, which are essential during their formative years, says Pantai Hospital Ampang consultant physician, gastroenterologist and hepatologist Dr Chieng Jin Yu.

According to a study published in the 'Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology', the prevalence of IBS among Malaysian adolescents is estimated to be around 12 per cent.

"Symptoms of digestive disorders vary but often include abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhoea, constipation, heartburn and nausea. It is important to seek medical advice if these symptoms persist," says Dr Chieng.

For example, IBS symptoms include recurrent abdominal pain at least one day per week in the last three months, associated with a change in defecation frequency and stool form.

Diet does play a critical role in maintaining digestive health.

Dr Chieng says consuming a balanced diet rich in fibre, fruits, vegetables and whole grains can promote healthy digestion. Conversely, a diet high in processed foods, sugar and unhealthy fats can lead to digestive problems.

However, data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 indicates that 95.1 per cent of Malaysian adults have inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables daily.

"Regular exercise, staying hydrated, eating meals at regular intervals and managing stress are all beneficial for digestive health too."

Avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol consumption are also important.

A study by the Health Ministry found that physical inactivity was prevalent among 25.1 per cent of Malaysians, indicating a need for increased physical activity to promote digestive health.

Dr Chieng says stress can negatively impact digestion by causing the release of stress hormones that disrupt the digestive process. This can lead to symptoms like stomach cramps, bloating and changes in bowel habits.

Research has shown that chronic stress can alter gut motility and increase gut permeability, leading to conditions like IBS.