

Get fit in 2013



JOAN CHEW

The new year has just started and it is not too late to make some resolutions. They can be hard to keep and Mind Your Body wants to lend a hand.

At the end of last year, readers were invited to write in with their health-related resolutions. We

picked three readers we thought we might be able to help. Experts were roped in to dispense advice and put the trio on the right path to their goals.

Watch this space in December to find out if they succeeded in their health quest.

Her marathon dream

Polytechnic lecturer Shirley Tham, 39, has an exercise regimen that seems adequate. Three a week, she runs 5 to 6km around her neighbourhood in Choa Chu Kang. About once a month, she plays badminton.

She runs two to three 10km races each year, the furthest being a half-marathon in 2010, finishing in 3hr and 36min.

But that is not enough for the 1.5m-tall woman. She wants to mark her 40th birthday in December by completing a marathon in under seven hours, an idea she has toyed with for three years.

She has made completing the Standard Chartered Marathon Singapore in December her resolution for the year. With age catching up with her, she figures it is now or never.

She said: "A finisher medal cum T-shirt will make for lovely presents to commemorate my first 40 years and, hopefully, be a stepping stone to more marathons in the next 40 years of my life."

Even if she does not finish the marathon, she would gain experience and discipline from training, she said.

Her inspiration is 101-year-old Briton Fauja Singh, who ran the 10km race in the Standard Chartered marathon last December in about 95 minutes. Mr Singh was 89 when he ran his first marathon in 2000. At 92, he achieved his fastest time of 5hr and 40min.

She admires him because "he gave proper attention to the challenge before him and had the discipline to do things right by committing frequent and regular hours".

To keep her focused on her goal, she has signed up for three races in the coming months: the 10.5km Green Corridor Run on Jan 27, the 12km Safari Zoo Run on Feb 17 and the 21km NTUC Income Run 350 on April 7.

One problem she faces is the loneliness of a long run. In the last 21km of her half-marathon, she made a detour to a store to buy ice cream as she was bored and hungry.

She also had trouble finishing because of the stress running has placed on her hips and knees.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY
Dr Ong Joo Haw, a registrar at the Sports Medicine Centre at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, said Miss Tham has taken the right steps, as it is important to plan well ahead for a major physical undertaking like a marathon.

He said: "It takes a lot of self-discipline, a huge dose of commitment and a good amount of knowledge to train and complete a full marathon safely. If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

He advised Miss Tham to have a health screening before she embarks on a training regimen. Comprehensive health screening includes a full history and physical examination by a doctor and tests such as an electrocardiogram (which records electrical activity of the heart) and urine and blood tests.

It would show how well existing medical conditions are

controlled and may pick up other problems.

"With this, you will get an idea of your risk profile and fitness for participation," Dr Ong said.

He said runners commonly experience pain in the hips, knees, shins, ankles and feet, which might be caused by a person's running style.

There are three running styles based on how the feet land. Heel striking feels natural for most people but there is a tendency to over-stride, resulting in a lot of impact on the knees, hips and spine. Mid-foot and forefoot strikers have a faster pace but place more stress on their calves and Achilles tendons, said Dr Ong.

He suggested that Miss Tham experiment with different strike patterns over short distances to choose one she is comfortable with.

It is important not to ignore any persistent or recurrent pain or discomfort and consult a sports physician if there is pain, he added.

He noted that her current training regimen may be inadequate for marathon preparation.

She would need to increase her mileage and

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MISS SHIRLEY THAM (right), who would like to complete the Standard Chartered Marathon Singapore under seven hours in December

intensity of her runs by 5 to 10 per cent every one to two weeks. This means if she runs 5km in total in one week, she can increase this to 5.5km by the third week and 6.05km by the fifth week.

At least a month before the actual race, she should be able to complete 80 to 90 per cent of the total distance in one run. This means running at least 30km in one training run before December.

Near the race, she should dial back the distance and intensity to let her body recover, Dr Ong said.

He said she should also do resistance training and stretching exercises to build strength and flexibility, which will prevent injuries and improve performance.

He also recommended cross-training such as swimming, cycling or working on an elliptical machine to introduce variety to her exercise regimen and allow her body to recover from running.

Mr Matthew Pinkston Heath, a senior rehabilitation and functional trainer at the Functional Training

Institute, agreed that Miss Tham's training regimen would have to be intensified. He recommended she seeks guidance of a trainer who is a marathon runner, if she wants to complete the race in under seven hours.

He said she should consider running the Sundown Marathon in May which is a run in the cooler evening hours. For this, she could run 30km and walk the last 12km or adopt a run-walk-run strategy, he said.

He suggested that she also run in places such as Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, MacRitchie Reservoir or up the stairs of her HDB block, which would accustom her body to running on uneven terrain.

To gauge the nature of the impact on her hips and knees, she could seek help from running labs, which can do a video gait analysis, he said.

Both experts agreed it is a good idea to join a running club. Mr Pinkston said: "You can always draw strength from others instead of being alone by sharing stories of joy, suffering and drama with your buddy."

Training aside, Miss Tham has to be mindful of her nutritional needs.

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Camden Medical Centre, said marathon runners need plenty of fuel in the form of carbohydrates. She estimated Miss Tham needs between 1,800 and 2,300 calories daily.

She recommends an eating regimen of three main meals and two snacks a day, with varying portions.

For instance, breakfast could be a bowl of cereal with fruit and low-fat milk, and a small tub of yogurt. Lunch could comprise a bowl of rice, 1½ palm-sized pieces skinless chicken, ¾ cup of vegetables and a medium-sized apple. A snack could be a slice of bread with a hazelnut spread and a glass of fruit juice.

Dinner could be a plate of beef hor fun with vegetables and a serving of fruit.

In the six months leading up to her December marathon, Miss Tham's diet should focus on carbohydrate-rich food such as bread, pasta, rice, cereals and protein such as lean meat, fish, beans, lentils and dairy. Two servings each of fruit and vegetables have to be included every day.

Staying hydrated during training and on race day is important too, especially in hot and humid Singapore.

Dr Ong said fluid loss of just 2 per cent of a person's body weight can adversely affect his performance. Further fluid loss may lead to life-threatening consequences.

A way to gauge hydration level would be to check the colour and volume of urine, with small volumes of dark urine signifying poor hydration, he said.

Ms Reutens said people should weigh themselves before and after a training run to know their typical sweat loss.

A loss of a kilogram is about 1 litre of water loss.



ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

She advised drinking 300 to 500ml of water or sports drink 15 minutes before a run. During the race, drink two to three mouthfuls of fluid every 15 minutes.

Female endurance runners also face the risk of anaemia from iron loss through menstruation, sweat and foot strike haemolysis (breakdown of red blood cells when the foot hits the ground), Ms Reutens said. They should pump up their intake of meat, beans and lentils to replenish the iron loss, especially during their periods.

"Eat a piece of fruit after each meal to enhance iron absorption from food," she advised.

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Underweight for 20 years, Page 14

Cover Story

Battle of the bulge

Like most people, Mr J.G. Deng, 25, has been caught up in the rat race for most of his life. Exercise has always taken a back seat, said the engineer, who has battled obesity since primary school.

This year, he wants to change his lifestyle for good. He has made it his New Year resolution to lose 20kg.

At 1.74m and 110kg, he has a body mass index (BMI) – a measure of the amount of fat based on weight and height – of 36.3, well over the 27.5 that qualifies an Asian adult as obese. This puts him at high risk of health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer and bone and joint disorders.

Though he is young, his body is already showing signs of strain – he was diagnosed with high blood pressure at a pre-university medical check-up in 2008. His doctor told him to lose weight.

That prompted Mr Deng to start brisk walking around his neighbourhood twice a week for 20 to 30 minutes each time. He said: "I knew I needed to do more, but I was busy with my schoolwork."

That resolve did not last three months. He stopped exercising and turned his attention to studying.

Things got even worse after he graduated from the National University of Singapore last July and entered the workforce. Now, he takes a 15-minute walk once a week to the supermarket to buy groceries for his mother.

His factory supervisor mother, 59, and salesman brother, 32, are of healthy weight. Of his family, only his retired father, 60, is also obese, he said.

He spends most of his free time watching television, reading the newspapers or surfing the Internet.

He has three main meals a day. For breakfast, he may have spaghetti with chicken and vegetables or noodle soup.

He has chicken rice for lunch three times a week and for mee (braised noodles) or white rice with meat and vegetables on other days. He usually has a slice of honeydew as well.

Three times a week, he eats four chocolate bars that he stocks at his desk.

Dinner is usually a bowl of white and brown rice, two meat dishes and one serving of vegetables followed by three slices of watermelon or a whole guava.

He also has a pocket of potato chips after dinner three times a week.

A few years ago, he read an article on bariatric (weight loss) surgery and wondered if he should opt for it.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY
Dr Asim Shabbir, a consultant at the Centre for Obesity Management and Surgery at National University Hospital (NUH), said Mr Deng has set a reasonable goal of losing 20kg over 12 months. Doctors typically urge patients to lose 0.5kg a week.

Mr Deng needs to use more calories than he eats to lose weight, said Mr Hisham Musa, the managing director of fitness company Team Fitness Guru.

This means that he should do 150 to 250 minutes of aerobic exercise a week at moderate intensity, which means he can talk but not sing while exercising.

He should have a progressive physical activity plan, Mr Hisham added. For example, he should clock 10 minutes of physical activity a day for the first week and up this to 15 minutes a day the next week. After that, he should do moderate-intensity exercise.

Ms Phoebe Tay, a senior dietitian at NUH, calculated that Mr Deng now consumes 2,269 to 2,538 calories a day. She recommended he keep to about 1,800 calories a day.

He can do so by limiting his fat intake, by removing the skin in his chicken rice, not slurping up all the gravy in his rice mee and having two servings of vegetables and one serving of meat, instead of the other way round.

She said he should steer clear of "empty calorie" food which are energy dense but do not have much nutritional content, such as chocolates, sweets and ice cream. Instead, he can have a small box of raisins or 10 raw almonds.

But losing weight will get increasingly difficult for him because the body defends itself against further weight loss by decreasing the metabolic rate and stimulating appetite, Dr Asim cautioned.

If he cannot lose weight on his own, he should join a weight management programme at a hospital, said Dr Asim.

There, the medical team will see to his lifestyle modifications, such as putting him on a low-calorie diet and an exercise regimen and prescribing him medication.

If these measures fail to help him lose weight, then bariatric surgery is an acceptable option as he qualifies for it, said Dr Asim. Those with a BMI of at least 32.5 and have obesity-linked problems, such as diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol, and others with a BMI of at least 37.5, no medical conditions are candidates.

Two-thirds of obese people have hypertension, said Dr Foo Chek Slang, a general surgeon at Mount Elizabeth Novena Specialist Centre.

Overseas studies have shown that close to 80 per cent of obese people have their blood pressure reduced after bariatric surgery. For some, their blood pressure goes back to normal levels.

Of the three forms of such surgery, sleeve surgery in which a large part of the stomach is removed permanently is probably best for Mr Deng, Dr Foo said.

Lapband surgery has fallen out of favour and gastric bypass is more suitable for diabetic patients, he explained.

Bariatric surgery and three to five days of stay in a private hospital will cost between \$30,000 and \$40,000. At NUH, surgery alone costs \$5,000 to \$7,000 for subsidised patients.