

Experts dish out advice for goals for the new year

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RESOLUTION NO. 1: TO BE ABLE TO ENJOY EATING FOOD WITHOUT FEELING GUILTY

Freelance tutor S. Y. Lim, 40, was overweight as a child.

Relatives and classmates remarked on her size, and her secondary school teacher expressed disbelief when Ms Lim said she felt cold sitting under the fan on a rainy day.

Ms Lim's self-esteem plunged and she tried to hide her figure under loose-fitting tops and elastic pants.

When she was 18 years old and at her current height of 1.66m, her weight hit 75kg. This gave her a body mass index (BMI) - a measure of the amount of fat based on weight and height - of 27.2, which put her in the overweight range (between 23 and 27.4).

A healthy BMI for an Asian adult is between 18.5 and 22.9.

Ms Lim began dieting in her teens, and in her late 20s, finally achieved an acceptable weight of 55kg.

But she ended up losing too much weight and is now underweight at 45kg. She has a BMI of 16.3.

Ms Lim is contented with her weight now but laments that her life is "miserable".

She lives in fear of gaining weight, and diligently records every morsel of food she eats and plans her diet a day ahead.

If she has any dessert at all, she limits herself to half an ang kueh (glutinous rice cake), a tablespoon of cake or two spoonfuls of ice cream.

In November last year, she made an exception for her mother's 71st birthday celebration and shared a slice of cheesecake with her mother.

The next day, she skipped breakfast and lunch.

She said: "I'm envious of people who enjoy their food. Life is short, so I ask myself why I'm making mine so miserable."

Ms Lim wrote to Mind Your Body: "I hope I will be able to break free from this phobia of food, be able to enjoy food without guilt and eat healthily at the same time."

She tends to have either breakfast, lunch or tea each day, and her only regular meal is dinner.

Breakfast tends to be black coffee, and lunch may be a bowl of sliced fish beehoon or porridge, or a roll of popiah with soya

bean milk.

Dinner will be home-cooked rice with meat and vegetables.

Ms Lim estimates she consumes between 800 kilocalories (kcal) and 1,200kcal a day.

She does not exercise but tries to walk whenever she can - up escalators and from her home to the MRT station and back.

But her phobia of food makes social events difficult so she tends to skip wedding dinners and birthday parties.

SYMPTOMS OF EATING DISORDER

Dr Lee Ee Lian, a senior consultant psychiatrist at Novena Medical Centre, said childhood and adolescence are the formative years for creating one's sense of body image, identity and self-worth.

She said it is "very likely" that Ms Lim's fear of weight gain stemmed from the unkind comments she received then.

Dr Lee's eight-year retrospective study of 126 patients with eating disorders found that more than one in four patients reported how teasing or comments from others triggered their dieting behaviour.

Other studies confirm that being obese can lead to teasing, which gives rise to dissatisfaction with one's appearance,

prompts disordered eating and affects psychological functioning, she added.

Dr Lee said Ms Lim cannot be diagnosed with any medical condition until she has been assessed, but she seems to meet some of the diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa.

These include a persistent restriction of energy intake leading to significantly low body weight, an intense fear of becoming fat and an undue influence of body weight on self-evaluation.

Other symptoms suggestive of an eating disorder are excessive calorie-counting, and extreme self-imposed deprivation of certain types of food followed by guilt after eating them, Dr Lee added.

RISK OF NUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES

Ms Vanessa McNamara, a Singapore-based dietitian who runs her own consultancy, The Travelling Dietitian, said Ms Lim would require about 1,800kcal a day.

Her current calorie intake, especially when it is only 800kcal a day, is "far too low", said Ms McNamara. Most women need to consume at least 1,200kcal for their bodies to function effectively.

Ms McNamara warned that Ms Lim runs the risk of nutrient deficiencies, fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbances such as diarrhoea and/or constipation, gallstones, hair loss and skin lesions.

Both Dr Lee and Ms McNamara advised Ms Lim to seek professional medical help.

Doctors can check if she has underlying medical conditions which lead to weight loss, such as hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid), type 1 diabetes (pancreas produces little or no insulin) or malabsorption syndrome (the inability of one's small intestines to properly absorb nutrients from food).

Ms McNamara said a psychologist and dietitian can work with Ms Lim to achieve her goal of developing a positive relationship with food.

This would involve setting goals that are not weight-related, such as getting eight hours of uninterrupted sleep a night, increasing one's running distance or speed, or meeting iron requirements.

Ms Lim should also work on becoming a mindful eater, that is, becoming aware of how food makes her feel, and how it tastes, smells and looks.

FOCUS ON BEING HEALTHY

It is important that she shifts her attention from her weight to achieving health and fitness.

Ms McNamara said: "Instead of thinking about weight and calories, she should think about the quality of her food intake, whether she is meeting her nutrient requirements and how this may affect her health in the long term."

Ms McNamara is concerned that Ms Lim is lacking calcium in her diet, which puts her at risk of osteopenia (low-bone density), osteoporosis and bone fractures as she ages.

She advised Ms Lim to increase her fibre intake by eating a variety of fruit and vegetables and to include whole grains, such as multi-grain bread, brown rice, beehoon, lentils and nuts, in her diet.

Dr Lee said she encourages patients such as Ms Lim to think about what their bodies can do, rather than how they look.

She recommended that Ms Lim undergo cognitive behavioural therapy with a professional. This involves using techniques to challenge dysfunctional assumptions of her body image that affect her behaviour.

Ms McNamara added that people should have at least one meal a week when they do not think about the calories so as not to feel that they are depriving themselves.

Lastly, people around her also play a part in helping her achieve her resolution. Her family and friends should not talk about weight at all, either in positive or negative ways.

Ms McNamara said: "Instead, praise her for making healthy food choices and exercising."

RESOLUTION NO. 2: TO SHED EXCESS WEIGHT AND GET BACK INTO SHAPE

Undergraduate Richard Chung, 28, used to exercise regularly before his injury in January last year.

He would jog more than 4km around Bedok reservoir three times a week and attend group exercise classes such as Body Pump at least twice a week.

His weekends were dedicated to football with friends. But during one such game, he fell awkwardly and tore the hamstring in his right leg, which put him out of action for most of last year.

Mr Chung wrote to Mind Your Body: "The months I spent in a wheelchair and then crutches have made me a very, very lazy man."

When the final-year aerospace engineering student from Nanyang Technological University got rid of his crutches in March, he began physiotherapy sessions at Changi General Hospital which lasted until September.

Now, he exercises on his own but the momentum is gone.

Mr Chung said he is breathless after just 15 minutes of running. He and his 21-year-old girlfriend have yet to resume running and his football games are down to once a fortnight.

Months of being sedentary, coupled with a penchant for eating suppers, saw him pile on 17kg.

The 1.87m-tall student now tips the scales at 102kg, giving him a body mass index (BMI) of 29, which qualifies him as obese.

BMI is a measure of the amount of fat based on weight and height.

He should weigh no more than 80kg to have a healthy BMI of 22.9.

Mr Chung said he has been overweight for most of his life, except during national service.

His resolution is to lose weight and get back into shape.

Mr Chung usually drinks a cup of Milo for breakfast, have lunch in school of, say, vegetarian beehoon with mock meat, and eats dinner out with friends.

He tends to get peckish at night and needs to have carrot cake or roti prata to satisfy the craving. This happens three to four times a week.

To keep track of his calories, he downloaded a mobile phone app but found it a chore to use.

START WITH REALISTIC GOALS

Mr Gregory Fam, principal physiotherapist at the department of rehabilitative services at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH), said people change their habits for reasons of pleasure or pain.

Mr Chung needs to identify his greatest motivation - be it to get fit and boost his self-esteem (pleasure) or a fear of dying early

(pain) - before he can work out a strategy to achieve his weight-loss goal.

Mr Fam advised him to revisit a qualified physiotherapist to establish his baseline function and be assessed for residual problems, such as muscle imbalance or tightness.

These issues need to be addressed or he risks further injury, which would lead to more inactivity and weight gain.

Mr Fam advised Mr Chung to lose at least 5 to 10 per cent of his weight through diet and light exercise first before attempting high-impact activities, which are more stressful on the joints.

Mr Chung also needs resistance training using free weights.

Mr Seishen Gerard, a sports rehabilitation specialist at boutique gym Radiance PhysioFit, said it is safest for a physically inactive person or someone with a previous injury to start exercising using his own body weight first.

This means doing isometric exercises such as squats, push-ups, sit-ups or burpees.

Another expert, Ms Cindy Ng, principal physiotherapist at the Life Centre at Singapore General Hospital, suggested Mr Chung use a pedometer to get feedback on how much activity he is getting.

Even if he is busy, he can aim to walk 10,000 steps a day - equivalent to 8km - to keep excess weight off, she said.

She advised him to set realistic goals by making small changes: Start briskwalking or jogging twice a week for at least 30 minutes each time, increasing the frequency when he gets used to the routine.

CHOOSE HEALTHIER FOOD

Three dietitians calculated that Mr Chung is consuming about 2,500 kilocalories (kcal) a day now.

A reduced calorie diet with a planned daily energy deficit of 500kcal or more will allow one to lose between 0.5kg and 1kg per week. Ms Hedy Cheng, a dietitian at KTPH, said Mr Chung should consume between 1,800kcal and 2,300kcal a day to achieve this healthy weight loss.

Ms Cheng said losing weight successfully using calorie-counter apps requires the user to understand his eating habits and not just focus on the calories clocked.

She urged him to persevere with recording his food intake in order to be a mindful eater. Research shows that someone who vigilantly keeps a food diary will lose weight by doing what is necessary.

Mr Chung should also focus on three aspects of eating: Quality, quantity and frequency.

He should choose food prepared using healthy cooking methods (stir-frying instead of deep-frying), be mindful about average portion sizes (an apple at one sitting instead of three) and the frequency which he has treats such as laksa.

She advised him to make smart choices, such as choosing plain rice over chicken rice or nasi lemak, ordering hot drinks with low-fat milk, removing fat and chicken skin before eating and asking for less sauce or gravy.

EATING THE RIGHT FOOD PROPORTIONS

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Camden Medical Centre, recommended getting food proportions right, with half the plate being filled with vegetables, a quarter with high-protein food such as meat and the remaining quarter with carbohydrates such as rice.

Ms Reutens said vegetarian stalls typically serve 300g to 500g of noodles, so Mr Chung should eat just half of that.

He should also opt for less oily dishes, such as stir-fried vegetables and tofu, and skip the deep fried beancurd skin and mock meat.

Ms Reutens said it would take "a fair bit of willpower" by Mr Chung as his taste buds are used to salty and fatty food.

Yet, it takes just a week or two to get acclimatised to lighter fare, so he should not lose heart, she said.

Ms Sarah Sinaram, a senior dietitian at the Raffles Diabetes & Endocrine Centre at Raffles Hospital, frowned upon Mr Chung's choice of just Milo for breakfast.

She said Milo is mainly carbohydrates, which are so quickly digested by the body that he is likely to be "very hungry by

lunchtime".

If he has wholemeal bread with egg, the dietary fibre and protein would help keep him full longer, she said.

Ms Sinaram noted that Mr Chung lacked fruit in his diet. Fruit is low in calories and high in dietary fibre, which make them ideal snacks to stave off hunger pangs.

All good advice, but if Mr Chung wants the works, he would be a good candidate for KTPH's 16-week weight management programme, where a team of doctors and allied health professionals help patients like him, said Dr Michael Wong, senior consultant and head of the department of family and community medicine there.

RESOLUTION NO. 3: TO ADOPT GOOD HABITS TO STEM HAIR LOSS

Student Mohamed Imran Khan was only 12 when he started to lose his hair.

Now, still only 17, the junior college student said his problem began when he started shedding dandruff which progressed to hair loss.

The dandruff flakes got bigger as time went by, but worst of all was his itchy scalp, which got especially bad with heat and sweat.

Still, Imran thought little of his hair loss until people started commenting on it.

One teacher was concerned he might be too stressed in school.

Now, the hair on his head is uneven and sparse at the top. Imran says he envies people who can style their hair.

His New Year's resolution is to stick to two things he feels will make his problem better - avoid spicy food and get eight hours of sleep each night.

He has tried all kinds of shampoo and, two years ago, his mother took him to a homeopathic clinic where he was given pills and a hair cream.

Well-meaning relatives have recommended hair products enriched with aloe vera and told him to avoid anything containing sulphates. Nothing has really helped.

Imran's own research on the Internet suggests spicy food and insufficient sleep can lead to hair loss, so he is determined to abstain from his favourite sambal belacan and clock at least eight hours of sleep a day.

Imran wrote to Mind Your Body: "I hope my New Year's resolution will allow me to see a positive difference in my hair problem and ensure that I look presentable as I am still young."

He knows his hair loss is probably hereditary. His father, uncles and grandfathers all experienced hair loss in their 20s, a problem which also affects his male cousins of that age.

Imran knows his predicament will only get worse with age and wants to do something about it before the "hair loss becomes

irreversible", he said.

He added: "Our hair is a symbol of our identity as people judge us based on our appearance.

"When I have children and grandchildren in the future, I want to be able to show them pictures of myself and tell them how good I looked in my younger days."

EXCESSIVE OIL PRODUCTION

Unfortunately, the hope he has pinned on his resolution to help his hair issues may be misplaced as not much is known about what causes hair loss, said four dermatologists.

But they said an itchy and sensitive scalp with thick scales that are shed as dandruff could indicate a form of eczema known as seborrhoeic dermatitis.

Dr Lynn Teo, a dermatologist at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, said it is the most common cause of dandruff in young people and is related to excessive oil production.

As the skin is a continuous organ, the problem can occur on other body parts such as the eyebrows, creases of the nose, and armpits, she added.

Dr Wong Soon Tee, a dermatologist at another practice at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, said Imran's seborrhoeic dermatitis may be mild as it cannot be discerned in his photo.

A mild form of the disease generally does not cause much hair loss and hair will regrow once the itch has resolved.

They recommended that he treat his scalp with over-the-counter medicated shampoo containing ketoconazole, zinc pyrithione, coal tar, or cetrimide.

If such shampoo does not help after a few weeks of use, he should see a doctor who can then prescribe a topical steroid lotion to provide symptomatic itch relief.

MALE PATTERN HAIR LOSS

All four experts also think he has androgenetic alopecia, commonly known as male pattern hair loss.

This is a genetically determined disorder in which androgens, the male sex hormones, play a role.

Dr Lynn Chiam, a dermatologist at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, said the condition gives rise to thinning of the hair, beginning on the front of the scalp and progressing to the crown and then the back of the head.

Four in 10 men with male pattern hair loss will have noticeable hair loss by the age of 35.

Dr Chiam urged people such as Imran who develop male pattern hair loss at a young age to seek treatment early.

There are two treatment methods available, namely, a form of oral medication known as finasteride and a topical therapy known as minoxidil. Both halt or slow the progression of male pattern hair loss and has some effect on promoting hair growth.

Dr Chiam added there is no scientific evidence that taking spicy food aggravates hair loss.

She also advised Imran to avoid hair care products which cause his scalp to itch or to have excessive dryness.

And though the use of aloe vera may help with scalp redness, dryness and itch, there is limited evidence to show that it is a useful treatment method for hair loss, she noted.

As for factors which exacerbate hair loss, anything that stresses the body - poor sleep, illness, extreme weight loss, emotional stress - can contribute to it.

Dr Tan Hiok Hee, a dermatologist at Thomson Specialist Skin Centre, said: "There is no magic formula which states that eight hours of sleep per day is required because the amount of sleeping hours one requires differs between individuals and across age groups."

He said that most commercial types of shampoo contain sulphates - usually in the form of sodium lauryl sulphate - to help create lather, but these can cause skin irritation if left on the scalp.

Yet, there is "no good evidence that they are unsafe", he said.

In general, the experts advised people to gently towel-dry their hair, use a wide-toothed comb to reduce excessive tugging of the hair, watch their stress levels and maintain a healthy diet.

All the doctors said it is best for Imran to be properly assessed by a dermatologist, who will record a detailed history of Imran's problem and perform a physical examination on his scalp, nails and skin.

Blood tests may be ordered to exclude medical conditions such as thyroid dysfunction, anaemia and iron deficiency, all of which can lead to hair loss.



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