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Headline: One in two Asians have taken steps to improve their health in the past three months: Prudential study

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One in two or 52% of people in Asia between the ages of 21 and 55 say they have adopted two or measures in the past three months to improve their personal health.

Among the commonly cited changes made were engaging in more physical exercise, as indicated by 34%, and altering eating habits (29%).

Additionally, around a quarter, or 24% of individuals said they also sought to improve their mental health.

This need was underscored by the heightened stress, anxiety and depression levels that were induced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant safe management measures that were implemented.

These were some of the results highlighted in the recent “The Health of Asia” report produced by the Economic Intelligence Unit and commissioned by Prudential.

The results are based on the responses of 5,000 people who hail from 13 markets in Asia. The respondents come from a range of occupations and have different income levels.

Interestingly, a striking contrast was seen between the perspectives adopted by individuals in less and more developed countries in the region.

Citizens from less developed nations were more optimistic about their personal health in the near-term as well as their ability to manage their health and wellness.

However, exceptions to this were seen amongst those who could not afford to live healthily. Over half or 56% of people pointed to financial constraints as an issue preventing them from taking action to improve their health and wellness.

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A similar statistic was seen amongst respondents from Singapore with 48.7% saying that financial constraints limit their access to good quality food, exercise facilities or health technologies.

This in turn makes it difficult to take measures to improve their health in 2021, the respondents noted.

To this end, close to seven in 10 or 69% of Singapore-based respondents said they were pessimistic that their health will be better this year.

Andrew Wong, Chief Health Officer at Prudential Corporation Asia attributes this to the effective public and private healthcare facilities in terms of clinical outcomes.

“Life expectancies [in Singapore is] among the highest in the world. This might also be the primary reason why people are downbeat about their future health outlook,” he notes.

With this in mind, Wong reckons that people here are “well-informed and know the longer they live, the higher their likelihood of having chronic diseases and being more vulnerable to health conditions like cancer and stroke”.

Going forward, health screenings – which were classified as non-essential and took a back seat in the past year – should pick up as Singapore re-opens, mulls Pauline Straughan, Director for the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing at the Singapore Management University.

“It is important for us to address the backlog of health screenings when things start to normalise so we can arrest chronic ailments as they emerge,” she says adding that the incidence of chronic conditions here had dropped significantly last year, possibly due to the reduction in health screenings.

Aside from detecting illnesses, such screenings can also bring to light if an individual’s health markers show a likelihood of them acquiring a certain condition.

This ties in with the shift in the business models of insurance providers like Prudential, who are now prioritising preventative rather than protective care.

“As we know, most of the illnesses are preventable. By making healthy lifestyle choices from young, we can prevent and postpone them,” says Dennis Tan, CEO of Prudential Singapore. The life insurer is motivating Singaporeans to stay healthy through innovative ways using technology.

It is also looking to make staying healthy “fun so that people do not find it a chore”. One way it is doing so is with the K-Pop Supergroup SuperM online dance challenge which focuses on inspiring younger Singaporeans to keep fit.

Aside from physical health, there has been greater focus on the importance of mental and emotional well-being in the past year.

Some 15.2% of respondents from Singapore say they have taken measures to improve their emotional well-being or mental health between May and August last year.

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Government agencies have also been looking to ease the stigma surrounding mental health diseases and normalising the argument that they are no different from other physical diseases, says Staughan.

“Stepping up on social care and re-looking at how we organise our daily lives by avoiding negative triggers and stressors would help us achieve better mental health. Mental health disease is a chronic ailment, and community support is extremely important. It's a whole of society effort,” she stresses.