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NTU embarks on 20-year study to help Singaporeans prevent chronic diseases



1 of 2 Nanyang Technological University has embarked on a health study that is being conducted in the Population and Community Health Laboratories at the school's Clinical Sciences Building in Novena, which was unveiled on June 18, 2018. ST PHOTO: ALVIN HO

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Noel Low 

SINGAPORE - Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has embarked on a 20-year study to better predict and prevent chronic diseases among Singaporeans, one that aims to become a landmark in studying the health of Asians.

The longitudinal health study will be the first comprehensive, large-scale one for people of Asian heritage, said its lead investigator John Chambers, who added the study may involve as many as 100,000 to 200,000 Singaporeans eventually.

"Landmark studies done in the US, UK and Germany do not represent 60 per cent of the world population which are not of European heritage. The genetics and medical predispositions are different," said Professor Chambers, who specialises in cardiovascular epidemiology at NTU's Lee Kong Chian School Of Medicine.

The study is being conducted in the Population and Community Health Laboratories at the school's Clinical Sciences Building in Novena, which was unveiled on Monday (June 18). The building houses other laboratories focused on research on chronic conditions that commonly afflict Singaporeans such as obesity and diabetes.

Dr Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State for Health, said the launch of the laboratories is timely as "Singapore earnestly prepares for its rapidly ageing population in the next one to two decades".

The new facilities will contribute substantially in the area of population health management and help transform the country's model of care, she added.

Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 30 to 84 are eligible to join the Health for Life in Singapore (Helios) study, which hopes to recruit 10,000 participants by end-2019.

Participants will go through a comprehensive health screening.

For instance, they will have the structure and function of their organs measured. A full brain and body MRI scan as well as retina and bone density scans will also be done.

Participants will be asked about their lifestyle and dietary habits and their samples of blood, stool, and urine will be stored in a biobank for future molecular analysis. Participants will receive a report and be informed of any disease found.

The study hopes to work with the Ministry of Health to virtually track the health of its participants, so they do not have to make a return visit.