New centre set up to research ways to form healthy habits in people

Plans include testing novel interventions such as wearables, apps and games

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A research centre using behavioural insights to improve strategies for getting people to adopt healthy habits was launched on April 3.

For a start, the centre will focus on developing strategies to help people prevent infectious diseases, age well, tackle health issues like mental health, obesity and diabetes, and go for cancer screening.

It is the first behavioural health research centre in Singapore that bridges academia and clinical practice, said NTU and the National Healthcare Group (NHG), which jointly set up the facility.

At the Asian Centre for Health Behavioural Insights and Interventions, or Habits, behavioural scientists will work with medical doctors to develop effective interventions to improve health.

Professor Chong Phui-Nah, clinical director of Habits, said the centre will work with other healthcare organisations and government entities, including the Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Board, to implement its research findings.

Surveys have shown that there is a clear gap between intention and action when it comes to managing health.

For example, while people are aware of the importance of breast or colorectal cancer screening and want to go for it, the actual number of people who do so is lower, said the centre's director, Professor May Oo Lwin.

With plans to test novel interventions such as wearables, apps and games, the centre will develop and test strategies that make healthy behavioural changes more sustainable, said Prof Lwin, who is associate provost of faculty affairs at NTU.

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Preliminary findings from a 10-country study involving about 10,000 participants in Asia have shown that Singaporeans still rely heavily on healthcare providers for health information.

This contrasts with the West, where there is greater distrust and less reliance on healthcare providers, noted Prof Lwin.

In Singapore, healthcare providers can play a crucial role in helping individuals maintain healthier habits – often the most challenging part of lifestyle change.

A common challenge that family physicians face, said Prof Chong, is getting patients with diabetes and other chronic diseases to lose weight, eat healthily and exercise.

"They would promise me... to lose, very specifically, 2kg – from 64kg to 62kg, for instance. (They would say) 'the next time I see you, Prof Chong, you will be very proud of me'."

But they would return, saying sheepishly that their weighing machine was faulty or that they had failed to lose weight because they were celebrating Chinese New Year, said Prof Chong, who is also a senior adviser and senior consultant (Family Medicine) at NHG.

"The older ones will tell you, 'I've got children, and they want to take me out, so I just eat' or 'I've got neighbours who bring cakes over, so I just eat them; otherwise they'll be wasted.'"

These are among the behavioural challenges that Habits aims to tackle, said Prof Chong, who is the former CEO of NHG Polyclinics.

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