ISSUE 14.2021

National Healthcare Group POLYCLINICS

Transforming PRIMARY CARE

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A RECIPE FOR LIVING RIGHT
HOW GOOD FOOD AND GOOD HEALTH CAN GO HAND IN HAND

IN AND AROUND
NHG RESEARCH & INNOVATION AWARDS, WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY LIGHT-UP AND MORE



A FOCUS ON DIABETES

ONE BATTLE, MANY FRONTS

Despite the on-going efforts against COVID-19, the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics continues the perennial fight against diabetes, with strategies suited to changing times

2021 APEX® AWARDS FOR PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE



Diabetes – Let's Beat This!

Since Singapore's War on Diabetes was announced in 2016, the battle against the disease has been fought on many fronts, from prevention, early detection and timely intervention to enhanced disease management that is anchored in primary care. This fight continues to be of priority today. According to the National Population Health Survey report 2020, the rate of diabetes mellitus during the period 2019-2020 was 9.5%, affecting 1 in 10 Singaporeans aged 18 to 74, which shows a slight increase from 2017, when the prevalence rate was 8.8%.

With COVID-19 pandemic, this issue has become an even bigger concern. Restrictions on social activities are leading to a rise in sedentary lifestyles, which may exacerbate the impact and risk of complications on chronic illnesses such as diabetes. For those who contract a COVID-19 infection and have chronic conditions are at higher risk of COVID-19 complications if their chronic diseases are not well managed.

This highlights the importance of the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics' (NHGP) chronic disease interventions that enable and empower patients to prevent or delay the onset of chronic diseases even amid a pandemic. NHGP has continued to provide holistic and relationship-based care by moving healthcare upstream and activating patients to participate in their own care to achieve more positive health outcomes. In our cover story *'Staying Vigilant against an Invisible Threat'*, we feature the multiple fronts of fighting against diabetes, both prior to and during the pandemic. Read about the various targeted initiatives and services over the years and how patients continue to receive care safely in the comfort of their homes.

We also speak to an NHGP Senior Dietitian Ms Lim Su Mei in *Up Close With*, where she empowers patients to manage diabetes and other chronic diseases through recommending sustainable dietary modifications. She also shares her challenges in learning about people's motivations in order to offer relevant advice that they can take to eat healthy and stay healthy — as individuals and as families.

These examples underscore NHGP's commitment to transform primary care by adapting quickly and providing support to patients in order to meet the growing demands of our nation's healthcare needs while battling COVID-19. As Singapore transits to an endemic COVID-19 state, chronic diseases continue to be a concern and it is more important than ever to take charge of one's own health and lead healthier lives.

And even as we continue to be vigilant to an evolving virus, we should also take time for family and friends in the coming festive season. Here's wishing everyone joyful and healthy holidays ahead!

The Editorial Team

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Note:
Some photos featured in this issue were taken before the pandemic, while others were taken at different phases of COVID-19 in Singapore.

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An NHGP nurse conducting Diabetic Retinal Photography (DRP).

STAYING VIGILANT AGAINST AN INVISIBLE THREAT



Despite the on-going efforts to keep COVID-19 at bay, the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) continues to remain focused on another battle – the nation's War on Diabetes.

The battle against COVID-19 may have dominated the headlines for the last two years, but the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) has not lost sight of another critical fight — the War on Diabetes. Launched in 2016 by the Ministry of Health to rally a whole-of-nation effort to tackle Diabetes Mellitus (DM), it has remained one of NHGP's core areas of focus even during the pandemic. With COVID-19 changing the way most people work, study and play, the National Population Health Survey 2020 noted that there was an overall drop in the level of physical activity, with more people embracing sedentary lifestyles. This was likely due to the lockdowns brought about by the pandemic.

Such a drastic lifestyle change increases the risk of Type 2 Diabetes, which is linked to sedentary lifestyles and excess weight. However, such risks can be managed or mitigated, says Dr Moses Tan Mong Heng, Family Physician at Kallang Polyclinic and one of NHGP's Specialty Advisors for Endocrinology and Metabolic Disorders: "Risk factors for Type 2 Diabetes include age, weight and level of physical activity. While we cannot control our age, we can manage our eating habits and the way we live. The first step to fighting this disease is to have a better understanding of it."

KNOW YOUR ENEMY



Understanding the disease starts with screening. "Diabetes is an insidious disease that is largely asymptomatic, so screening is the only way to detect it," cautions Dr Tan. He further explains that


An NHGP nurse conducting Diabetic Foot Screening (DFS).

pre-diabetes is a condition where an individual's blood sugar levels are higher than usual, but not high enough to be diagnosed with diabetes. However, if pre-diabetes remains undetected and changes are not made to the individual's diet and lifestyle, diabetes can eventually develop. So, early detection and prevention can make a difference.

Early Detection and Preventive Care
Given the wide-ranging impact diabetes can have on one's well-being, early



NHGP Teamlets comprise Family Physicians, Care Managers and Care Coordinators.

detection and management of the disease is critical. NHGP therefore offers health screening for adults at risk of diabetes such as those diagnosed with hypertension and a history of cardiovascular disease.

"Based on personal experience with my patients, many go for screening because they witness the complications related to diabetes experienced by their loved ones, such as gangrene, blindness or stroke. This makes them realise the importance of screening even when they feel fine," shares Dr Tan. "As doctors, we can educate our patients during consultations so that they have a better understanding of the disease and appreciate the importance of early treatment and detection, which will prevent complications."

Cardiovascular Risk Screening (CRS) is another example of how NHGP effectively identifies and flags asymptomatic individuals to detect cardiovascular risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. "From the various screenings, those diagnosed with pre-diabetes are closely reviewed and monitored by doing tests every six months. They are also advised to stay healthy by observing proper diet and regular exercise," he adds.



An NHGP doctor conducting a consultation session via a video call.

CHARGING AHEAD AGAINST DIABETES



Apart from detection, the management of diabetes is just as important. In NHGP, a multi-pronged approach is adopted to educate, empower and enable patients so that the disease is well-controlled.

Empowering Patients through Relationship-Based Care

In a speech given at the College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS)'s 50th anniversary event on 3 December 2021, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasised the importance of forging strong relationships between Family Physicians and patients in bringing about effective care. He cited NHGP's teamlet care model as one which has been successful in helping patients achieve good control of their chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

In NHGP, patients with chronic conditions are empanelled into NHGP's Teamlets, which each comprises two Family Physicians, a Care Manager, and a Care Coordinator. The Care Manager is a nurse trained in the management of chronic diseases and the Care Coordinator is a support staff member who follows up with patients on their appointments and schedules patients' annual screening tests and vaccinations. Such Teamlets are also supported by allied health professionals to provide customised and holistic care plans based on a patient's medical conditions. This same team supports the patient throughout their care journey. "The goal of NHGP's Teamlet Care Model is to foster strong relationships between the patient and the care team so that patients take ownership of and are empowered to manage their own health," adds Dr Tan.



An NHGP physiotherapist guiding a patient through the Lighter Life weight management programme.

Expanding Tele-Health Services

Catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic and in a bid to ensure that patients continue to receive continuous and quality care safely from the comfort of their homes, NHGP has expanded its range of Tele-Health services such as Tele-Consultations (with doctors) and Tele-Dietetics. Such services enable patients to monitor and self-manage their chronic diseases safely. Tele-Health services also provide the opportunity for the care team to gain better insights into patients' lifestyles through their home environment and eating habits, adds Dr Tan.



An NHGP dietitian conducting a consultation session via a video call.

Conducting Intervention Programmes

Intervention programmes such as NHGP's 'Tiered-Risk Interventions for Managing Weight' (TRIM) and 'Lighter Life' further serve to educate and encourage patients to better manage their health through making lifestyle changes.

Under NHGP's TRIM programme, patients are systematically identified and their health risks ascertained. These patients are then referred to suitable health coaching and intervention programmes within and outside the polyclinics depending on their risk stratification.

For Lighter Life, NHGP helps patients with chronic conditions like diabetes achieve weight loss in a healthy and safe manner through peer and community support. Patients are taught how to develop healthy dietary and exercise habits, and to self-initiate goal-setting and practical action plans customised to their lifestyle needs. Patients enrolled in Lighter Life are coached over six months by a multi-disciplinary care team comprising a Family Physician, nurse, dietitian, physiotherapist, clinical psychologist and other health experts.

NHGP remains committed to continue to be a part of the nation's fight against diabetes. However, while NHGP's screening and intervention efforts help patients identify and manage their health risks early, equally as important is the patient's own commitment to want to improve their condition. "A greater part of managing chronic diseases lies in the hands of the patient. Our goal is to educate and empower our patients so that they can take charge of their own lives, and live it normally," concludes Dr Tan.

HEALTH SCREENINGS FOR PATIENTS WITH DIABETES



Diabetic Retinal Photography (DRP)
NHGP offers annual eye screening or Diabetic Retinal Photography for the early detection of eye complications related to diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy is caused by damage to blood vessels in the retina which can lead to blindness. Vision loss from diabetic retinopathy is preventable if diagnosed early and treated appropriately.



Diabetes Mellitus (DM) Foot Screening & Surveillance, Treatment & Escalation Protocol (STEP)
NHGP offers Diabetic Foot Screening (DFS) for patients with diabetes at all NHG polyclinics. To further reduce the risk of foot ulcers and lower limb amputation, NHGP also offers Diabetes Mellitus (DM) Foot Screening & Surveillance, Treatment & Escalation Protocol (STEP) where patients are taught self-help skills by the care team to detect, mitigate and prevent foot complications through regular foot checks and seeking treatment early.

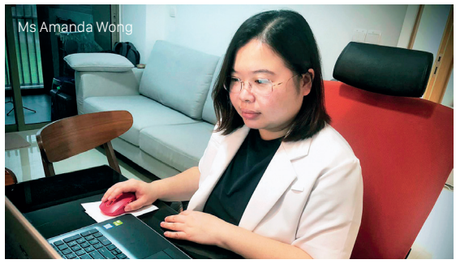
Holistic Approach to Lowering and Tracking Chronic Kidney Disease (HALT-CKD)
HALT-CKD is designed to empower patients and the community to make healthier lifestyle choices for their well-being and partner NHGP doctors to enhance the control of their chronic kidney disease condition through appropriate medications. Implemented at all NHG polyclinics, this programme identifies and manages risk factors such as high blood pressure and poor diabetes control which contribute to chronic kidney disease deterioration.

NHG RESEARCH & INNOVATION AWARDS 2021

Two teams from the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) were recognised at the NHG Research & Innovation Awards (NRIA) this year. The team led by Ms Julia Zhu, Nurse Clinician, Nursing Services, was presented the NHG Research Impact Award for its phenomenological study on the experiences of patients with diabetic lower extremity amputation in primary care. The other winning team, led by Ms Sharon Chen, Director, Operations, received the NHG Healthcare Innovation Award for its work on transforming experiences and redesigning the patient journey at NHG Polyclinics. Both teams looked at enhancing patient care delivery on the ground.







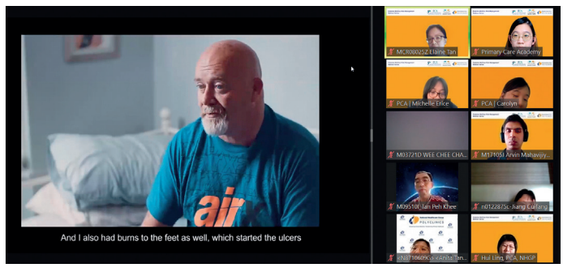


NHGP WEBINAR ON FALL PREVENTION

On 2 October 2021, the NHGP Frailty Workgroup organised a webinar titled 'Falls and Fear of Falling'. The session saw Ms Jacqueline De Roza, Advanced Practice Nurse, Geylang Polyclinic; Ms Chia Hui Shan, Senior Pharmacist (Clinical), Yishun Polyclinic; and Ms Amanda Wong, Senior Podiatrist, Hougang Polyclinic, sharing how medications and wearing proper footwear can further prevent falls, particularly for the elderly, as well as other tips. The webinar garnered positive feedback, with many participants requesting for more related topics for seniors to be shared at future sessions.

DIABETES MELLITUS RISK MANAGEMENT WEBINAR SERIES

The Primary Care Academy and the Central-North Primary Care Network co-organised a webinar series on Diabetes Mellitus Risk Management held on 25 September, 9 October and 16 October 2021. The sessions were specially curated to equip primary care healthcare professionals with essential knowledge and skills to manage individuals at risk of developing, or who have developed diabetes complications. Various Family Medicine specialists and experts also explained diabetes risk management through a combination of asynchronous learning and case discussions.





LIGHT UP IN BLUE FOR WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY



To commemorate World Mental Health Day, NHGP joined other Singapore landmarks and organisations by lighting up its polyclinics' facades in blue from 10 – 31 October 2021. This initiative was co-organised by the Agency for Integrated Care, Institute of Mental Health, Health Promotion Board and the National Council of Social Service, as part of the annual event first organised in 2016 to gather like-minded community partners to raise awareness on mental health in Singapore. This collective blue-light-up effort hopes to shed light on mental health issues and encourage those who are 'feeling blue' to open up and have conversations about their challenges.

VIRTUAL LEARNING JOURNEY COLLABORATION WITH PATHLIGHT SCHOOL





On 19 and 26 August 2021, Ang Mo Kio (AMK) Polyclinic hosted a simulated visit for students from Pathlight School. Given the current COVID-19 situation with Safe Management Measures in place, the students visited the polyclinic from their classrooms. The sessions saw the students being taught how to make an appointment to visit the polyclinic, how to register themselves for the appointment, how to undergo basic health checks and how to attend a video consultation sessions with a doctor and nurse.

Aligned with the Ministry of Social and Family Development's efforts to build a more inclusive society and empower Persons with Disabilities, AMK Polyclinic has partnered and organised many learning journeys with Pathlight School since 2016 to encourage its students to participate actively in the community and learn more about accessing public healthcare independently.

A RECIPE FOR LIVING RIGHT

Senior dietitian Ms Lim Su Mei relishes helping patients take charge of their well-being by showing how good food and good health can go hand in hand.

My late grandma had diabetes and passed away from complications. Her diet in her final years was very restricted because there were so many foods that were not suitable for her condition. I wished I could have done something to help her at that point, and that combined with an interest in food and nutrition, led me on the path to dietetics.

My recipes are healthy and usually kid- and family-friendly. I do a lot of baking, cooking and exploring healthy recipes all of which I share with my patients. As a dietitian, my patients include weaning babies as young as six months, picky eaters, patients with diabetes and patients in their 80s.

My greatest joy is in witnessing the improvements in my patient's journey. One of my patients with Gestational Diabetes Mellitus (GDM) first came to me in a very anxious state. GDM is a condition when one develops high blood sugar levels during pregnancy. She did not know what to do with her diet and was constantly worried about her sugar levels and the nutritional requirements of her unborn baby. I taught her meal-planning tools such as carbohydrate-counting to meet her nutritional needs during pregnancy while managing her sugar levels, and she gave birth to a set of healthy twins. Even after delivery, she and her husband continued to maintain a healthy lifestyle and weight, which could help to prevent diabetes in the future. It was very fulfilling because I could really see the impact of my advice, not just on her but her family as well.

My challenge is in understanding what motivates each patient. Some might tell me 'My entire family has diabetes, what is the big deal?' I therefore has diabetes, what is the big deal?' I therefore have to explain to them that even small changes can bring about big results. If you just reduce your sugar intake by one teaspoon a day, you save 600 calories in a month, which may lead to losing 1 to 2kg in a month! My work lies in getting patients to see the importance of modifying their lifestyle and sustaining it. But such breakthroughs often take time, I am glad to have the opportunity to build long-term relationships through regular follow-ups with my Teamlet patients at the clinic.



I usually see my patients every two to three months and take the opportunity to better understand their lives. It is more impactful than overloading them with information in one session. The advent of tele-consultation sessions in the wake of the pandemic has also given me the opportunity to virtually visit the homes of my patients and better understand them. For example, for paediatric patients, I can time the consult sessions to coincide with mealtimes so that I can observe the food the child is eating and even the environment they are in. With virtual consults, it makes it easier for my patients to show me what their meals consist of, or the different foods they consume.

We are often seen as 'food police' telling people not to eat this, that and the other. But deprivation is not sustainable. If a patient's favourite food is chicken rice, I advise them to remove the chicken skin, or control the portion they eat, rather than omitting it completely. I also encourage patients to bring along members of their family, especially those who usually prepare the meals. Because family support is so important, and it is always better when you get healthier together as a family!

Ms Lim Su Mei
Senior Dietitian,
Kallang Polyclinic