

## Editorial: A fat problem

Written by Administrator

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HE number of diabetics in this country has increased by 25 per cent over the last 10 years. One in 10 Malaysians suffers from this disease, compared with one in 20 Europeans.

While Asians in general and Indians in particular are believed to carry a higher genetic risk, the main reason for the climb in the incidence of diabetes has been the rise in obesity. People who are overweight are at a higher risk not only of diabetes but also of other chronic diseases.	t has been the deadly combination of bad nutrition and the lack of exercise that has made Malaysians the fattest Asians. With Type Two diabetes no longer the adult form of the disease that it once used to be, and with the increase in the number of children and teenagers diagnosed with this type of diabetes, it would seem that the best way to stem the disease is to recognise the risk factors and address them at an early stage. Which is why preventing obesity in childhood has to be a major health priority in this country.
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However, while the course of treatment to check this preventable ailment -- and the package of debilitating afflictions such as heart attacks, strokes and kidney failure that come with this "mother of all diseases" -- seems clear enough, persuading the at-risk individuals and populations to make the necessary changes to their eating habits and sedentary lifestyles is a daunting challenge. It has been an uphill struggle to convince Malaysians to reduce their intake of high-calorie drinks, cholesterol-rich foods and salty fare, and to exercise more. Prevention is the key, but it is going to take time before the kind of social shift that has been changing attitudes towards smoking begins to take place in the lifestyles and appetites of Malaysians.

And like the campaign against smoking, the focus on preventing the increase in body weight and waist-lines and the rise in sugar levels, fats and blood pressure should not just be on educating individuals to change their behaviour, as important as it is to create greater awareness of how to prevent and control diabetes. There is a need to consider legislative and policy measures, such as the ban on fast-food advertisements during children's programmes on television, or the initiative to make manufacturers reduce the content of sugar, fat and salt in their food products. Policy-makers, health practitioners and food providers should work together to prevent a future where Malaysians, young and old, are fatter and sicker.