War Against Diabetes: Three Keys to Drive Sustainable Change in the Community





Thailand's fight against diabetes was given a boost last November 14 (World Diabetes Day), with the launch of "Together Fight Diabetes" an awareness event jointly organized by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, Diabetes Association of Thailand and Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's Health Department. Today, Thais are encouraged to be screened for diabetes, and more emphasis is placed on the importance of good nutrition and leading a healthy lifestyle.

Just last October, the Thai Excise Department took the fight up a notch by doubling the tax on sugary drinks, in the second phase of its diabetes war, following the first excise tax that was applied two years before. The ultimate goal is to lower sugar consumption nationwide. Still, beyond government regulation, there's more that can be done to foster more sustainable, long-term change in the collective fight against diabetes.

This awareness campaign is a timely reminder of the role that each of us play to prevent the spread of this debilitating disease in our families and the communities we live in. All of us – from companies, to business leaders, to the broader community – can take action to drive public education, inspire cultural change, and nurture healthy habits among our youth.

Driving Public Education

Thailand has been ranked among the top twenty countries for the number of adults with diabetes[1], with almost 5 million diabetics, due largely to the rising occurrence of obesity and sedentary lifestyle. Today, only one in three people with diabetes have been diagnosed, while those who are

unaware and are left untreated are at high risk for other illnesses such as stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and eye disease.

Especially with an average of 200 diabetes-related deaths reported each day in Thailand, there is an urgent need for us all to step up efforts to build awareness and deepen understanding about diabetes. Following the government's lead, businesses can actively encourage their employees to assess their risk of diabetes, while individuals can help their communities to do the same.

These days, with online assessment tools readily available, like the websites of World Diabetes Day website and Thailand's Diabetes Association, assessing the risk of diabetes only takes a matter of minutes, and can be key to help you take the path away from a lifetime of suffering. In fact, over 50 percent of Type 2 diabetes cases are preventable and the condition can be controlled through a series of positive lifestyle modifications, including adopting good nutrition habits, leading an active lifestyle, quitting smoking, reducing alcohol intake, and getting more sleep.

Inspiring Cultural Change

Beyond public education efforts, the fight against diabetes also requires significant lifestyle changes in our families, communities and workplaces.

For starters, choose your foods wisely – select wholegrains instead of refined carbohydrates; skip sugary drinks and opt for water, coffee or tea; and consume healthy fats from leaner cuts of fish and chicken. To rally your family members along, stock up with healthier food options, as well as plenty of fruits and vegetables, and prepare home-cooked meals more often.

Companies can also inspire cultural changes in the workplace. Through providing healthy snack options, organizing group exercise sessions, and encouraging participation in fitness events, such as the Bangkok Marathon and other outdoor activities held all year-round, these efforts can help to improve the overall health and well-being of their employees.

Nurturing Healthy Habits Among Our Youth

Most parents would agree that starting children on healthy lifestyle habits early allows them to continue making wiser health decisions as they grow older. This is especially crucial, as the percentage of type-2 diabetes in Thais aged 10-19 rose from 13 percent between 2002-2007 to 27 per cent between 2008-2019, according to a study by Chulalongkorn Hospital's Paediatric Endocrinology Department.

Simple lifestyle changes such as reducing the dispensation of sweet treats and cultivating an appreciation for fruits and vegetables can condition a child's taste buds to enjoy healthier foods in the long run. Encouraging physical activity outdoors can also get children used to being out and about often.

Overall, the war against diabetes is a marathon, not a sprint. While early results have been encouraging, it takes all of us to do our part to inspire change in our families, communities and workplaces, to keep this debilitating disease in check for the long-term good of our society.

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