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Older adults support healthy ageing initiatives, but everyday adoption is limited: Study

Findings show need for environment, systems that make healthy choices easier

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A new study has revealed critical gaps in preventive health and lifestyle habits even as Singapore is on track to become a super-aged society by 2030. Despite strong support for pro-health policies, their everyday adoption among older adults remains limited.

The findings suggest that beyond medical access, building a healthier ageing population requires an environment that makes healthy choices easier and part of daily lives.

Researchers at the SMU Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (Rosa) polled 7,056 Singaporeans between the ages of 53 and 80 in August 2025. The study, Living Well: The Built, Lived, And Social Determinants Of Well-being, draws on data from the Singapore Life Panel (SLP), a nationally representative longitudinal survey that has been conducted since 2015.

The survey found that over 90 per cent of respondents indicated that they support preventive healthcare initiative Healthier SG. Similarly, more than 90 per cent of them said that having regular health screenings is important. Slightly more than half have enrolled into Healthier SG, and a fifth intend to do so.

While there is increasing health awareness among older adults, usage of health-related services,

however, is limited.

Among those who signed up for Healthier SG, annual health screening and health or medical reviews are the most widely used. However, referrals to allied-health professionals, community exercise or wellness classes, and lifestyle or nutrition advice appear under-utilised. This suggests that there is a need to increase their awareness of preventive health and wellness services available in the community.

While Healthier SG also encourages continuity of care where individuals work with a general practitioner to take charge of their health, more than 80 per cent of respondents said they will still seek other doctors even if they enrolled in the programme, mostly to get a second opinion or specialised care for various health conditions.

Presenting the findings at Rosa's 5th annual symposium on Successful Ageing on Nov 19, Rosa's director, Professor Paulin Straughan, said that while older adults want to take charge of their health, they need the right systems and surroundings to do so.

"Healthy ageing isn't only about medical care, it's about building neighbourhoods, communities and routines that make living well part of everyday life," she said.

When it comes to lifestyle behaviours, the survey revealed that over half of the respondents engage in some form of vigorous or moderate physical activity, but



The study by the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing found that while there is increasing health awareness among older adults, usage of health-related services is limited. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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ROSA DIRECTOR PAULIN STRAUGHAN

about 30 per cent of older adults do not engage in any activity at all.

In terms of dietary patterns, fast-food consumption averaged about once weekly among respondents, while meals at hawker centres averaged five times a week.

While more than 82 per cent are

aware of Nutri-Grade labels on drinks and most said these influenced their choices, habitual preferences persist. Over half regularly request less sugar, but only about 22 per cent ask for wholegrain options most or all of the time.

Prof Straughan said that as tradi-

tional family structures change, with more singles and fewer children, it is important to leverage neighbours as extended family members, and revive the "kam-pung spirit" in the community to build strong social support.

And with traditional models of institutional care becoming increasingly unsustainable, promoting a shift towards ageing in place is crucial, she said. This emphasises the importance of both the built and social environments in supporting holistic well-being in ageing.

When it comes to the built environment, the top four functional amenities for ageing in place are medical facilities, transport, eateries, including hawker centres, and provision shops. Meanwhile, community centres, active ageing centres, parks and open spaces can serve as a third place, aside from home and work, for social connectivity.

The social environment in the neighbourhood plays an important role for older adults' holistic well-being.

Rosa found that the quality of relationships among neighbours is more important than structural living conditions for ageing in place. Close contacts and neighbours encourage active participation and active lifestyles, while social integration and engagement fulfil social needs and foster a sense of belonging. Hence, ageing policies should prioritise social connectivity across diverse living arrangements.

Prof Straughan said there is a need to shift towards preventive, community-based systems that embed pro-health behaviours in everyday life, and to better leverage built and social environments to promote healthier neighbourhoods.

As Singapore has a shorter runway to prepare for a super-aged society, sharper innovation is needed, she added.

"We have to learn how to come up with impactful interventions that will transform the way we live," she said. "We have a very literate young senior group, and there is very strong trust in the central government, so let's leverage that."

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