

Feed your gut the right way

THE Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the basics of developing immunity through good nutrition and making the right food choices. Protein, some types of fat, minerals, vitamins, probiotics and prebiotics all have a major role to play in improving immunity.

So, how do we generate new knowledge in this area? Is there a relationship between nutrition and immunity? Is immunity compromised only in sick individuals? Or is it observed among other groups of populations too? To answer these questions, Seah Sheng Hong (Shawn), Audrey Meno Cleo and Chen Wei Mun, undergraduate BSc (Hons) in Nutrition students at International Medical University (IMU) undertook a research project on athletes.

They studied the effect of probiotics and omega-3, or fatty acids derived from fish, on athletes undergoing rigorous training. Seah says, "I learnt about the importance of prebiotic and probiotics for gut health contributing to a strong immune system in lectures. But these concepts came alive when we did the research."

Dr Sangeetha Shyam, Dr Megan Chong and Dr Tan Seok Shin from IMU and Dr Mahenderan Appukutty, a Sport Science collaborator from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), were the team who designed this study. They were interested to see if taking a specific strain of probiotic supplement decreased the number of colds and stomach upsets that the athletes had in a week.

Dr Sangeetha says, "The probiotics are small organisms that do big work. Once they reach your colon, they, along with some of the chemicals that they produce, reduce inflammation, communicate with your immune system and improve it. Consuming fish oil can theoretically improve the way the probiotics stick to your colon and flourish and be more effective. So, your gut does more than just absorb and digest your food."

Dr Chong adds, "The improvement in immunity can be measured by the number of immune cells you have in a blood test or even the proteins in your saliva. Practically, we can see if they fall sick less as the coaches would like to see them attend all their practice sessions. The athletes will be rewarded with improved performance."

IMU Nutrition students are trained to appreciate the multi-faceted role of nutrients. This knowledge contributes to the development of recommended nutrient intakes (RNI) for populations in a specific country.

The RNI is like a prescription of the amount of energy and different nutrients that you should eat to suit your age, gender



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and lifestyle. As nutritionists, they plan simple balanced meals that can help to achieve the desired nutrients within a client's budget, taste preference and cultural sensitivity.

The three-year Nutrition programme at IMU equips students to pursue careers in various fields including industry, education, health promotion, research and journalism. The curriculum accords strong emphasis not only on core nutrition modules, but also on key profession-supporting modules such as nutritional status assessment, diet-related non-communicable diseases, monitoring and evaluation of programmes, communication and marketing management.

IMU's Nutrition programme gives students a rigorous experience in research methodology and application for each stage of the research process and data management. Students will get to showcase their completed research in scientific conferences and journals. For this programme, IMU has collaborated with Deakin University, Australia so that nutrition students can pursue the first two years of their degree at IMU and then transfer to Deakin University to complete their degree.

Upon completion of the degree, students will then receive a Bachelor of Nutrition Science from Deakin University, one of Australia's largest universities with strong global linkages and world-class research.

Each year, the Nutrition programme will commence in July and September. Make an online application today and begin a career that challenges you to open new doors.

If you have just completed your SPM and do not have pre-university qualification, consider enrolling in the one-year IMU Foundation in Science, the direct route for entry into any of the university's degree programmes, including credit transfer options.

■ For details, visit www.imu.edu.my or email start@imu.edu.my or call 03-2731 7272.