

An annual health check-up could uncover an underlying condition.  
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# Can you game your health check?

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The health check-up is an important annual ritual that gives you a snapshot of your health and what you should watch out for. It could uncover an underlying condition, even if you feel fine and have no symptoms.

However, some people think that by eating healthily and exercising up to a week before, they can game the system and get a clean bill of health.

But does that burst of effort move the needle on the results?

Dr Cindy Xie, family physician at Healthway Medical's Bukit Batok West clinic, says: "It is difficult to achieve meaningful improvements in one's metabolic profile after just one week of dietary or lifestyle changes."

Dr Leong Choon Kit, family physician at Mission Medical Clinic in Serangoon, highly discourages the practice.

He says: "When patients revert to their unhealthy diet after getting their results, and monitor their blood pressure and sugar levels on their own at home, they realise those parameters are worsening. They know that the results at the clinic do not reflect the real status of their body and they are deceiving themselves."

Dr Xie adds that the apparent improvement in certain health markers after just one week of dietary and lifestyle intervention can cause a patient to be falsely reassured and complacent.

"If the patient stops eating healthily and exercising after the test, it may result in worsening of metabolic control and increased cardiovascular risks," she cautions.

Rewarding oneself with an unhealthy meal after being given a clean bill of health is also not advisable, say doctors.

Dr Xie notes that reverting to old eating habits with high sugar, high trans fats and saturated fats, as well as high salt can increase one's risk of developing diabetes, dyslipidemia, high blood pressure and obesity.

Dr Yak Sin Lin, general practitioner at Lifescan Medical Centre, says that while it is fine to indulge from time to time, it is more important to stay on track and be consistent in maintaining healthy diet and lifestyle practices.

She recommends devising a healthy diet and exercise programme that works for one's lifestyle and is sustainable in the long run. "I would suggest finding an exercise buddy who may be your spouse, friend or colleague. You and your exercise buddy can motivate each other and be accountable

for each other's diet and exercise routines."

Try using apps such as MyFitnessPal to track meals and wearing a fitness watch to monitor daily activity levels, says Dr Yak. Simple ways to increase one's activity level include alighting one bus stop early and taking the stairs instead of the lift, she adds.

**Ultimately, quick fixes are not the answer to achieving positive long-term health outcomes, says Dr Lau Pik Onn, senior resident physician at Icon Health Screening.**

**"The purpose of a health screening is to ensure you get an accurate picture of your health status, so you can make informed choices on how to maximise your long-term health. Making small incremental changes to your health habits will help you to maintain these changes and achieve long-term well-being," she adds.**

Here is a breakdown of the impact of exercise and diet on some common health indicators.

## CHOLESTEROL LEVEL

Though adopting a consistent low-fat and low-carbohydrate diet may lead to a reduction of low-density lipoprotein and triglyceride levels in as quickly as four weeks, Dr Xie says more prominent effects are seen only after three to six

months.

Low-density lipoprotein is also referred to as bad cholesterol, and triglyceride is a type of fat in the blood.

Exercising only before your health check may not help significantly too.

It takes three to six months of regular exercise to see an improvement in bad cholesterol levels, and up to nine months to note a difference in good or high-density cholesterol levels, notes Dr Xie.

## BLOOD PRESSURE

Similarly, an improvement in blood pressure may be seen after maintaining a low-salt diet for four weeks, but the effect is most sustained only after three to six months of a change in diet, says Dr Xie.

A person's blood pressure may temporarily lower after 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, but a meaningful, long-lasting improvement in blood pressure levels can be seen only after one to three months of regular exercise, she adds.

## BLOOD SUGAR

Fasting sugar levels, on the other hand, may improve after following a low-calorie diet for a few days, says Dr Xie.

## Doctors discourage eating healthily and exercising days before a check-up in hopes of a good result

"However, the HbA1c test, which measures one's sugar control over the past three months, will not be significantly altered by a lower carbohydrate intake for just a week," she adds.

While exercise improves the body's sensitivity to insulin, resulting in a lower blood sugar level for up to 24 hours after a workout, Dr Xie says a sustainable improvement can be observed only after three to six months of regular exercise.

## OTHER HEALTH MARKERS

**Dr Lau says that while there are health markers that can be altered by a change in dietary and lifestyle habits, these take a long time to show a difference.**

**These health markers include body mass index, cardiovascular risk and lung function for smokers.**

**Certain markers, such as those that look for cancer, will not be affected by dietary changes in the days before a health check, she adds.**

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