

RIMA Brief

Discussing Health Advocacy in Singapore | April 2025

Speakers: Dr Mariam Z, Ustaz Imran Othman

Key Takeaways

1. **We have more control over our bodies and their responses than we think**, and our choices play a significant part in preventive measures.

2. ***Halalan toyyiban***: food and drink that is both permissible and beneficial is best, as not everything that is lawful can be assumed to be good.

3. Being conscious of what we consume is not to weaponise food. **There is plenty in our cultural and religious foods that is healthy and beneficial.**

4. There are **so many more aspects to well-being beyond food and consumption** – for instance, mental, emotional, and other aspects of physical health. Other lifestyle choices like practising mindfulness and good hygiene too make a difference.

5. Health is an ongoing journey that takes time, and **we should encourage each other** to better our health as a community.

6. Above all, **moderation is key!**

BACKGROUND

In 2023 Singapore was declared a 'blue zone', a label accorded to only six areas in the world. Blue zones refer to places where people live longer than average, experience strong community bonds, and generally practice healthy lifestyles.

However, unlike the other five countries whose labels emerged naturally from long-standing established cultural traditions, Singapore's accolade was said to be through an "engineered" or purposefully and intentionally created lifestyle, thanks to a heavy hand in health regulations. Mandatory nutrition labels on food packaging, strict taxes on cigarettes and alcohol, and free-of-charge fitness trackers are only a few in a long line of policies and campaigns encouraging Singaporeans to make better health choices.

Does the same reputation extend to the Malay/Muslim community? While admired for its rich, decadent dishes, Bin Khidzer writes that "sickly, idle and risky minorities" has been a popular narrative in the country when it comes to diseases such as diabetes.¹ This Islamic month of Syawal especially, after a month of abstaining from food, drink, and other vices, is inextricably linked to food festivals, bazaars, and homes full of delicacies.

This webinar asks: How do we balance important cultural practices with taking good care of our bodies? What are some current health initiatives and how can they be made more effective? And what does it mean to be healthy, anyway?

We heard from Dr Mariam, founder of the Centre for Integrative and Holistic Health and Director of Wellness with Dr Mariam, who aims to empower the community towards healthier

and more fulfilling lives. Ustaz Imran, senior head of the Office of Imam at Al-Ansar Mosque, provided an important Islamic viewpoint with regards to health and wellness from the Quran and prophetic traditions.

WHO IS REALLY IN CONTROL?

Dr Mariam began the webinar by sharing findings that changed her perspective on health. Towards the end of her 15 years career in cancer research, she found that only 5-10% of the causes of cancer was inherited or genetic, while approximately 90-95%, a huge proportion, was due to environmental factors, diet, and lifestyle choices. The major diseases that Singaporeans face – heart diseases, diabetes, and cancer – all share the same risk factors as well, suggesting that their underlying causes could be similarly attributed to external instead of internal reasons. Another important discovery was that some diseases which were initially thought to be lifelong, like Type 2 diabetes, were recently found to be reversible.

These tell us that although illnesses and poor health sometimes feel like things that happen to us, they may also happen *because* of us. Of course, the human body is complex and there is much that is beyond our control, but we have more control over our bodies and their responses than we think, and our choices play a significant part in preventive measures. A full month of fasting in Ramadhan shows that with practice and motivation, we can actually control our stomachs and cravings, not the other way around. Dr Mariam also shared that gut health is connected to our nervous system, brain productivity, immunity and many other functions in the body. Improvement in one is a win for all – if we can implement better practices in one, we can surely do so in the other, creating a healthy cycle.

HALALAN TOYYIBAN

Before Muslims consume any food, the first question we tend to ask is: is it *halal* (lawful) for us to eat? Upon determining its permissibility, many tend to find no fault in diving right into whatever dishes we please. However, there is a second criterion that we tend to miss. Allah s.w.t says in the Quran:

“O humanity! Eat from what is *halalan* (lawful) *toyyiban* (beneficial) on the earth.”
(Quran 2:168)

It is thus important for us to remember as well that *halal* and *toyyib* go together, and not everything that is lawful can be assumed to be good.

Controlling our diets and trying to ensure that everything we consume is both lawful and beneficial is easier said than done. But our webinar speakers agreed that being mindful of health does not mean that one should stop eating delicious food altogether. Instead, we can explore different dishes along the same flavour profile, or different ways of preparing the same dish to increase the amount of nutrients in our food; for instance, choosing crunchy instead of smooth peanut butter, adding banana into sandwiches, and brightening up food with natural sweeteners such as fruit and honey instead of sugar.

The webinar was also a reminder that being health conscious is not to weaponise food. Much of the conversation around diet and health is often focused on the negative aspects (too salty, too oily, too fatty, too much coconut milk) but as Malay/Muslims, there is plenty in our cultural and religious food that is healthy and beneficial. For one, tempeh, which is a traditional Indonesian food made from fermented soybeans, is full of good bacteria and

high in protein and prebiotics. Turmeric, a bright yellow spice that is a staple in Malay food, has many health benefits such as reducing inflammation and supporting liver function. Olives feature prominently in the Quran and are nutritional powerhouses that are heart healthy. A favorite food of the Prophet s.a.w, dates, provide great amounts of fiber and is rich in antioxidants. Most necessary of all, water: Ustaz Imran reminded viewers that the Prophet s.a.w said that there is *barakah* (blessing) in water, which is so essential to the hydration and bodily functions of all living beings. There's also honey, black seeds, figs, grapes – the list goes on.

WHAT IS HEALTH?

While food certainly plays a large role in our wellbeing, the speakers also urged viewers to take a holistic view on health. Both pressed on the fact that there are so many more aspects to well-being beyond food and consumption, such as mental, emotional, and physical health. Other lifestyle choices like practising mindfulness and good hygiene too make a difference.

PHYSICAL

Religious practices: The Prophet s.a.w was a master of horse riding, archery, and wrestling

Other good practices: Cycling, running, and other cardiovascular exercises

SLEEP

Religious practices: Sleep on the right side; take little naps during the day to rejuvenate energy

Other good practices: Get at least seven hours of restful sleep

HYGIENE

Religious practices: The Prophet s.a.w said, "Cleanliness is half of faith." (Sahih Muslim 223)

Other good practices: Washing our hands properly with soap and for 20 seconds; masking up when we are sick

MENTAL HEALTH

Religious practices: *Selawat* and *zikr* (Supplication and remembrance)

Other good practices: Practising mindfulness; prioritising alleviating stress and anxiety

Additionally, Ustaz Imran brought up an important point about the intersection between science and faith. When it comes to new medical treatments or procedures, some may be hesitant to venture into the unknown, preferring to stick to more traditional methods and medications. However, if new treatments do not involve prohibited or harmful substances, a hadith of the Prophet s.a.w reminds us that Islam is open to good:

"O slaves of Allah, seek medicine, for Allah has not created a disease except that He has created its cure, except for one illness [old age]."
(Sunan Ibn Majah 3436)

HEALTH ADVOCACY AND INITIATIVES

In 2014, Singapore's Health Promotion Board (HPB) updated its longstanding Healthy Diet Pyramid to a new guide called My Healthy Plate that focuses on proportions of different food groups instead of a certain number of calories per day. The colourful visual boasts half a plate filled with vegetables and fruits, a quarter with

grains, and a quarter with meat or other sources of protein. Dr. Mariam elaborated on the new guide to viewers, sharing that the same guide was being promoted by the World Health Organization as well.

There are specific campaigns targeted towards the Malay/Muslim community in the fasting and festive periods. The Korang Ok? ("Are You OK?") initiative by HealthHub and HPB runs seasonal Ramadan and Hari Raya campaigns called "Kita Dah Cukup Manis, Kurangkan OK?" ("We are sweet enough, reduce it OK?") to promote healthy eating and lifestyle habits. However, in terms of reception, while the speakers said that they did not have access to official statistics and evaluation, some initiatives were not met with very favourable responses on the ground.

For instance, when mosque personnel served sardines instead of red meat, or when HPB distributed over 1,000kg of brown rice to be served during iftar at mosques in 2019, congregants were not too pleased. Many are already comfortable with and quite used to what they have received all these years and unfortunately are only more aware or motivated to change after they get a certain sickness. By then, however, solutions may be more limited.

But our advocates are not deterred. They understand that changing habits is not easy, especially with issues like food and lifestyle, so public initiatives need to be slowly introduced and backed with reasoning instead of being forced wholesale to others without awareness. Perhaps an alternative approach in the future could be to serve mixed brown and white rice instead, coupling gradual endeavours with education until it becomes acceptable and normal to the masses.

Their general advice was that health is a journey

that takes time, and to not give up if there have not been huge successes in changing habits. It may take at least one or two months for a new habit to stick and having accountability partners can be a huge help. With more self-awareness in our community, especially if we eat together at home and in mosques, we can encourage each other to better our health as a community.

Another point raised during the dialogue was on the notion of mindset shifts – health does not have to be expensive. Over the years, the idea of organic, quality ingredients has become synonymous with higher expenses. In this webinar, Dr Mariam reflected on her own experience in her health journey, when she started off thinking “Everything must be organic!” but gradually realising that this was not financially sustainable. She suggested reconsidering what is really necessary that is also within one’s budget (not everything has to be organic), and to be creative when preparing food or when choosing what to eat.

The future is not bleak. On the ground, there has been a lot more awareness and people who are interested in improving their health; Dr. Mariam was especially heartened that there is a lot more holistic health programmes nowadays. Through her work, she found that people are aware of the general best practices although there was a need for more education in specific areas. She believes that COVID-19 was one of the large-scale issues that made people more aware of the urgency of hygiene and having good health. Ustaz Imran shared that he had a colleague who was facing difficulties in standing up in prayer and had to be seated throughout, but with motivation and a change in diet, his condition gradually improved and he could pray while standing.

CONCLUSION

There are so many aspects to health and well-being that it may get overwhelming at times. In the Q&A, Dr. Mariam advised viewers on how to seek health information online, and to be discerning when it comes to using search engines for different medical queries. While it is good to look up information on the web and keep up-to-date on the latest research and studies, we must be careful in the credibility of the information we consume. Additionally, as health is something extremely personal and subjective, going to a doctor and getting professional advice is sometimes necessary as well. It may also be helpful sometimes to work together with other health professionals such as health coaches like herself or even mental health and other practitioners, to help keep the progress on track.

Ultimately, moderation is key. It is important to keep cultural practices alive as our traditions and celebrations are integral to our identity. At the same time, as Muslims, we recognise that our body and health are blessings from Allah s.w.t, and it is our *amanah* (responsibility) to take care of ourselves, and to consume and practise *halalan toyyiban*. We ~~can~~ have our ~~cake~~-kueh and eat it too.

SOURCES

[1] Bin Khidzer, M. K. (2024). Sickly, idle and risky minorities: Race and diabetes under Singapore’s emergent “insurantal imaginary.” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 18(4), 431–456.

ABOUT OUR SPEAKERS



DR MARIAM Z
DIRECTOR &
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As Director of Wellness with Dr Mariam and founder of the Centre for Integrative and Holistic Health, Dr. Mariam is **deeply committed to community well-being**.

Drawing on her 15 years as a medical researcher in cancer drug discovery, she now **educates and inspires** through personalised wellness workshops, health coaching, and volunteer work with organizations like Willing Hearts and mentoring youth at risk.



USTAZ IMRAN
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Ustaz Imran holds a Bachelor's Degree in Syariah from the Islamic University of Madinah. He also obtained a Master of Philosophy from RZS-CASIS (University Teknologi Malaysia).

Ustaz Imran is currently the **senior head** of the Office of Imam at Al-Ansar Mosque.

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