Thumbs up for study on ageing

MELoR participants are equipped to take better care of themselves.

DAVID Cho, 68, a former bank officer, was a heavy smoker. When he found that it was getting more expensive to feed his habit, he quit smoking in 2005.

"I used to smoke 60 cigarettes a day or three packets. In those days, a packet of cigarettes cost RM7. Today, it is more than RM10," said Cho. "I'm better off spending money on nutritious food."

In 2007, he had a stroke. He woke up one morning and experienced immobility on the left side of his body. Then last December, Cho slipped and fell when he stepped on a pool of water on muddy ground. He fractured his arm.

These days, he walks slowly and uses a cane to steady himself. He has not regained full use of his left hand. Cho enrolled as a participant in Universiti Malaya's Malaysian Elderly Longitudinal Research (MELoR) last month.

"I get free blood tests and health checks. I'm more informed about my health status," said Cho who does tai chi daily to keep fit.

"Every new day is a bonus," he added.

Chua Pek Chwee, 69, a former agricultural officer, is pleased with his health screening by MELoR. "Except for my high cholesterol, I've no major health problems," Cho has been on medication for mild hypertension and cholesterol for the past decade.

"Knowing my health status gave me confidence. A blood test can cost over RM100. At MELoR, the health screenings are free for all participants," said Chua.

During the home interviews by MELoR, he was asked if he would stay in a retirement village if one was built.

"I would rather stay in a well run retirement village with medical facilities than go to a nursing home which is not well run. Anyways, retirement villages or nursing homes are for those who are not independent and do not have family support," said Chua who added that he would rather stay home with his family.

As a MELoR participant, Chua received tips on keeping his home safe and age-friendly. "When using the staircase, hold the railing. The bedroom should be kept simple without any obstructive furniture. Bathrooms should not be wet and slippery but kept dry. And use slip-free mats," said Chua.

"MELoR is trying to use a sampling of the elderly participants and postulate what kind of senior citizens would live healthily and happily."

A MELoR participant, Chua reckoned the study also wants to find out what kind of environment and social interaction are vital for the health and well-being of senior citizens in Malaysia.

Accountant Cheah Bai Tah, 76, said that by joining MELoR, he can get his health problems checked. He has eye problems and tinnitus.

Leong Yin Fong, 81, is pleased to be picked for the electoral roll and invited to join MELoR. Despite her age, Leong is sprightly and goes for regular walks in the neighbourhood. "I practise qigong to stay healthy," said Leong.

"My vision and hearing are not so good. I learnt that the house should be decluttered to prevent falls. We might fall if we trip over objects in our path," said Leong. "I appreciate the home safety tips from MELoR. Leong is happy that MELoR sends a van to pick her up and send her home after a clinical assessment.

Julie Tan, 68, and her husband are also MELoR participants. Other than the benefits of health checks, they were pleased to learn how to keep their home hazard-free.

"Entrance to the house must be kept clear to prevent falls in the elderly. We were also advised on how to keep our bathrooms and toilets safe," said Tan. Majorie Chew

ARE senior citizens falling at home or outside? If they are falling outside, what are the factors that cause them to fall? And if they are falling at home, one should be concerned about the home environment.

Questions pertaining to the elderly and falls are issues that interest Associate Professor Tan. "Combining physical, emotional and cognitive problems, elderly people may fall. Elderly people often have a fear of falling. A fear of falling increases hip fractures. When there is a hip fracture, the elderly patient would require nursing home care. This will add to their financial burden.

"Someone in the family has to be available to look after the patient because the chances of recovering full independence after a hip fracture is quite small. Dr Tan pointed out.

After such a fall, the patient usually needs more help. For example, a wife may have to help with household chores and other activities that are usually done by the husband. This will add to their financial burden."

Falls take toll on elderly