

# Non-Communicable Diseases in the New Normal

Feb 24, 2021

## Novartis educates susceptible COVID-19 groups on lifestyle changes amid the coronavirus pandemic

**Kuala Lumpur, 21 January 2020** – NCDs are estimated to account for 74% of all deaths in Malaysia<sup>1</sup>. Coupled with the infectious COVID-19 virus, patients with NCDs are prone to more complications that can cause a severe deterioration to their health<sup>2</sup>. Novartis Malaysia initiated the “NCDs in the New Normal” workshop to empower patients, caregivers and the public to take an active role in managing their health especially during these unprecedented times.

NCDs are medical conditions or diseases that are not infectious; these include cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, and psoriasis<sup>3,4</sup>. It is of utmost importance for patients to understand their health status and why they have an increased risk of a COVID-19 infection.

### Staying safe while living with hypertension

The Institute for Clinical Research (ICR), a research institute under the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Malaysia, found that around 55 percent of COVID-19 fatalities occurred in individuals suffering from high blood pressure<sup>5</sup>.

This is a known fact that has been shown in various studies, that patients with cardiovascular diseases including hypertension are more likely to get the serious manifestations of COVID-19 or even die from it. Those who have their hypertension untreated or poorly controlled are also at higher risk compared to those well controlled with medications<sup>6</sup>.

**Dr Choo Gim Hooi, Consultant Cardiologist from Cardiac Vascular Sentral Kuala Lumpur** shared, “During this pandemic, it was observed that there was an excess of deaths related to cardiovascular diseases for example, stroke and heart attacks. Owing to the fear of contracting COVID-19, patients had reduced or cancelled their doctor visits, or were not refilling their prescriptions. I would encourage all hypertensive patients to continue to see their physicians especially when they are unwell, maintain regular follow-ups and remember to take your medications.”

**Dr Choo** reminded of four key points for hypertensive patients to take note of during this COVID-19 pandemic. “*Just like everyone else in the community, practice physical distancing, wear masks, sanitise your hands regularly, etc. Secondly, boost your immunity by ensuring healthy dietary choices, exercising regularly, getting enough rest and sleep and watch your weight. Next, remember to maintain regular follow-ups with your attending physicians and take your medications as prescribed. Last but not least, please protect oneself with the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.*”

### Asthma and COVID-19

Individuals with respiratory illnesses such as asthma should take additional precautions as well. The best way

for asthma patients to avoid complications is to ensure that their asthma is well controlled. This includes strict adherence to their medication<sup>7</sup>.

**Dr Helmy Haja Mydin, Consultant Pulmonologist, Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur** shared that “There are two types on inhaler medications – a controller and a reliever. A reliever is used to provide instant relief by immediately opening up your airways, but it does not address the root cause of the patient's airway inflammation. This is where the controller inhaler comes into play. Patients need to use this regularly every day, even if they feel well, to keep their inflammation under control. This will assist them in being less reactive to triggers or stimuli around them.

*“A cause for concern is that many Malaysians have poor control over their asthma due to poor medication adherence and incorrect use of the inhaler. If you have asthma, but it is well controlled, your risk of severe complications from COVID-19 is the same as anyone else. This tells you the importance of correctly using a controller inhaler. Patients need to use this inhaler at the right time and with the right technique. This is particularly important in minimising the complications from COVID-19 in the context of asthma.”*

The need for good asthma control is essential, now more than ever. It is a good time for patients to discuss their asthma action plan with their doctors and ensure strict adherence to it<sup>8</sup>.

For example, patients can identify and avoid known asthma triggers. This may be a challenge for some, as disinfectants could potentially trigger an asthma attack. To reduce the risk of triggers, patients may consider requesting a non-asthmatic family member to assist with their house-cleaning and avoid entering any room that is being cleaned. The type of disinfectants used should also be taken into consideration, preferably ones with hydrogen peroxide (no stronger than 3%) or ethanol (ethyl alcohol) and which do not contain peroxyacetic acid or peracetic acid<sup>10</sup>

### **Challenges of psoriasis patients in the new normal**

People living with psoriasis are also at risk of becoming impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This condition, which affects approximately 500,000 to 800,000 Malaysians<sup>9</sup>, may appear to be a cosmetic issue but is an autoimmune disease that increases inflammation and causes an overproduction of skin cells, essentially when the immune systems of patients are overactive<sup>10</sup>.

While uncomfortable on its own, psoriasis is also commonly associated with other co-morbidities such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity<sup>11</sup>, all of which places the patient at higher risk of contracting COVID19<sup>12</sup>

Psoriasis patients should adhere to the same standard operating procedures as everyone else such as maintaining social distancing, keeping their hands clean, and wearing masks when out in public. However, the frequent use of cleansers may pose an irritation to patients. As an alternative, psoriasis patients could wash their hands with a hypoallergenic soap instead of hand sanitisers, as this reduces irritation. Frequent moisturising helps to provide a relief as well, especially if the moisturiser or cream does not contain any harmful chemicals or fragrances that may cause a trigger<sup>13</sup>

In terms of medication, patients should continue their treatment plan set by their medical professionals. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that patients maintain at least a 30-day supply of any prescription drugs needed to avoid frequent travels out of their home. It also helps if patients speak to their dermatologists about any issues that may put them at risk of COVID-19 such as the need to leave their house to go to work or visit a clinic or hospital.

**Dr Peter Ch'ng, Consultant Dermatologist, Gleneagles KL**, shared that *"During this COVID-19 period, many people may be under additional stress and unfortunately, this could be a trigger point for psoriasis patients. It is recommended for individuals with psoriasis to try and manage their stress effectively. Furthermore, avoid smoking and consuming alcohol as these can also cause your psoriasis condition to worsen. Maintaining a proper sleep schedule can assist patients as well. If you have any concerns, please reach out to your dermatologist to advise you accordingly."*

**Azwar Kamarudin, Country Head, Patient Access and Government Affairs, Novartis Corporation**, shared that, *"The ongoing pandemic has resulted in the many restrictions that may present challenges to patients and their caregivers to visit their health care professionals this may lead to many NCD patients experiencing delay care for their disease. As such, self-care is now paramount, perhaps more than ever*

*"Therefore, Novartis Malaysia initiated this workshop to further furnish the public with accurate and evidence-based health information from a panel of experts. This is to empower patients, caregivers, and the public to take an active role in managing their health during these unprecedented times."*

### **About Novartis**

Novartis is reimagining medicine to improve and extend people's lives. As a leading global medicines company, we use innovative science and digital technologies to create transformative treatments in areas of great medical need. In our quest to find new medicines, we consistently rank among the world's top companies investing in research and development. Novartis products reach nearly 800 million people globally and we are finding innovative ways to expand access to our latest treatments. About 108,000 people of more than 140 nationalities work at Novartis around the world. Find out more at <https://www.novartis.com>.

### **About Novartis Malaysia**

Novartis Malaysia has been present in Malaysia since 1971. Following the merger of Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy, Novartis was formed in 1996. In 2015, Kuala Lumpur was chosen as one of the five Novartis Global Service Centres which delivers a broad variety of services to the Novartis group of companies worldwide. Services offered by the Kuala Lumpur team include IT, People & Organization Services, FRA Operations, Procurement Services, Real Estate & Facilities Services and CONEXTS contributor by Clinical Research Malaysia in sponsored research with 16 research projects, leading the market of other healthcare players in this sponsored research space.

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