Cover Story

Nutrition for protection

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Cover photo: This denotes the key messages promoted to mark the National Nutrition Month in December 2021 under the theme “Nutrition for Protection” (Photo credit: Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka).

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Healthy eating provides all necessary nutrients and other non-nutritive compounds that are necessary for the body to function at its best.

Proper nutrition through a well-balanced diet creates a stronger immune system and lower risk for contracting infectious diseases. Consumption of a variety of fresh and unprocessed or minimally processed food with spices provides all necessary nutrients as well as non-nutritive compounds such as phytochemicals including antioxidants. Micronutrients and phytochemicals in food considerably help to optimize immune functions and protect the body from toxic effects of free-radicals and other chemicals released during inflammation-mediated conditions. Unhealthy diet may alter white blood cell function and healthy gut microbiota that are important in fighting the pathogens. Healthy eating also reduces non-communicable diseases (NCDs) by decreasing the risk of heart disease, stroke, obesity, and type 2 diabetes while boosting an individual's mental health. It further controls nutritional status of the individual by preventing micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity as well as loss of muscle and bone mass.

The National Nutrition Month (NNM) is held annually by the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka in view of making the community aware of the current nutrition information. This year, NNM was launched on 1 December 2021 with the theme “Nutrition for Protection” considering the necessity of boosting immunity especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, prevention and control of ever-increasing NCDs as well as improving problematic malnutrition indicators in the country. Awareness campaigns on healthy eating and

other related activities will continue till the next nutrition month in 2022 focusing on behaviour change communication to improve population nutrition.

Ministry of Health revised the Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) for Sri Lankans together with 14 general messages for healthy adults and four specific messages intended for pregnant women, young children, adolescents and elderly. New guidelines formulated with the financial support from Food Agriculture Organization and in consultation with technical experts in relevant health and non-health sector including academia, Sri Lanka Medical Nutritionist Association and Nutrition Society of Sri Lanka. Adhering to these guidelines will inculcate healthy eating behaviours in the community and expected not only an improvement of growth and development but also an enhancement of the quality of life among people with healthy long life. These guidelines are prepared based on holistic approach considering national and international nutrition recommendations as well as adapting to local contexts. They also support the concept of environmentally sustainable diet taking into account the environmental impact in food production and consumption.

Out of the 14 general messages in FBDG, five relevant for protection of health and nutrition were selected for behaviour change communication during the nutrition month 2021 until next year; First guideline to promote this year is “Add colour to daily meals balancing the correct amounts”, trying to emphasize the selection of a variety of food throughout the day as well as the week to acquire necessary nutrients for healthy life. The FBDG recommends whole grains and their products; vegetables and green leaves; plant (pulses) and animal (fish or egg or lean meat) sources of food; fruits; and nuts, oily seeds and oils to be consumed daily in recommended amounts. Fresh milk and its fermented products such as curd and yoghurt are also identified as a food group to consume as per the preference to add variety to daily meals. It also recognizes the importance of consuming fresh natural food in different colours, flavours, and textures to improve nutritional value and appetite, in addition to limiting the consumption of processed food high in fat, salt and sugar.

Messages that guided on consumption of whole grains and their products including parboiled or less polished rice; having at least two vegetables, one green leafy vegetable and two fruits daily in keeping with the World Health Organization guidance of five portions of fruits and vegetables a day; adding fish or egg or lean meat with pulses in each meal intended to have necessary nutrients for healthy life, while the fifth message selected “Limit sugary drinks, biscuits, cakes, sweets and sweeteners” is to prevent and control the NCDs through minimizing intake of sweets, sugar-sweetened beverages and added sugar.

Food and nutrition security is of utmost importance when it comes to healthy eating. Food and nutrition security exist when all individuals have access to nutritious food at affordable prices and utilize diverse food in adequate quantities. Advocacy and awareness campaigns are planned by the central, district and the divisional levels in the Ministry of Health as well as with multi-sector involvement during this year to achieve the dietary behaviour change among Sri Lankans. These multi stakeholder activities will be aimed at improvement of food and nutrition security through nutrition sensitive agriculture and utilization of locally available low cost, diverse nutritious food.

Advocacy on availability of healthy food at an affordable price, for relevant sectors and capacity building of primary health care staff and training master trainers in health and non-health sectors as well as civil societies will be conducted by the Nutrition Division and other nutrition related units in the Ministry of Health. At the same time, advocacy for food industries on reformulation of unhealthy food items and intensification of the availability of healthy food in food outlets, awareness on healthy eating in different settings including schools, workplaces will be conducted by the medical officer of health (MOH) offices. The civil society organizations including mother support groups, civil societies of Scaling Up Nutrition People's Forum, Sarvodaya movement will also support to disseminate the knowledge among community members and to accomplish the intended goals.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the food and nutrition security and at the same time those who suffered from NCDs and malnutrition affected severely, it was necessary to make community aware on healthy eating. Nutrition Division with the support of development partners including the Food & Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and Scaling Up Nutrition Peoples Forum disseminated these messages using different communication methods and continue to do so.

Through the above-mentioned multi-sector nutrition actions, it is expected to promote related FBDGs while attempting to improve population food and nutrition security. Hence, the cover picture of this issue, which coincides with the National Nutrition Month of 2021, illustrates the selected FBDGs for dietary modifications to protect population health with strong immune systems, prevention and control of NCDs as well as malnutrition.