Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are chronic conditions such as diabetes, ischaemic heart disease, hypertension and some forms of cancer which do not transmit from one person to another. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 51% of all deaths in the South Asian region was attributable to NCDs in 2008. This number is expected to increase to 72% by the year 2030. NCDs also affect the quality of life of people. For example, individuals with uncontrolled diabetes can have complications such as kidney failure, blindness and non-healing wounds which would reduce the quality of their life. Since most NCDs cannot be cured, and have to be treated lifelong, it is very important that we try to prevent these diseases.

According to the WHO, NCDs share four risk factors - tobacco use, physical inactivity, alcohol and unhealthy diets. The WHO also states that to prevent NCDs, we have to reduce alcohol and tobacco consumption, reduce prevalence of physical inactivity, and halt the rise in obesity and diabetes. Since diabetes is also linked to obesity, it is important to prevent obesity, which is responsible for numerous NCDs mentioned above.

So, what is obesity? It is an abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health. We use an indirect measure of body fat to assess obesity, called the body mass index (BMI). If you know your height in meters and weight in kilograms, the BMI is calculated by weight / (height^2). For example, if your weight and height are 70kg and 1.8m respectively, your BMI would be 70/1.8 = 21.6. For Sri Lankans, a BMI of 18.5 to 22.9 is considered normal, while 23 to 24.9 is considered to be overweight and 25 or above is classified as obese. Waist circumference is another measure used to find out abdominal obesity. A waist circumference of more than or equal to 90cm for men and more than or equal to 80cm for women are considered to be the cut offs for abdominal obesity for Sri Lankans. If you fall into these obese categories, it is important to seek medical advice to reduce weight.

What are some lifestyle changes we can make to reduce weight? It is important to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. One way to reduce weight is to fill half of your plate with vegetables and fruits, a quarter with grains like rice and the other quarter with protein food such as fish, skinless chicken or pulses such as dhal, cowpea or green gram. Another important step to lose weight is to reduce the fat content of the diet. To achieve that we have to cook food without adding too much oil or coconut milk. It is better to avoid deep-fried food and have foods prepared as ‘mirisata’, boiled, baked or as salads. Another important step in reducing weight is to avoid high-calorie foods such as cake, puddings, ice-creams, short-eats, butter, cheese and margarine. We should also try to drink water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages.
Physical activity is also very important in maintaining a healthy weight. Every adult should engage in moderate-intensity physical activity for 150 min each week. Examples of these activities are brisk walking, gardening, engaging in sports, swimming and cycling. Children should engage in physical activity at least for one hour each day. In addition to engaging in physical activity, it is important to limit sedentary time such as sitting and watching television.

Visit PeMEx 2015, the 8th Medical Exhibition of the faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya, from the 24th to 31st August 2015 at the Medical Faculty premises, to learn more about how you can minimize the Non Communicable Disease risk that threatens your health.

Step into PeMEx 2015, Help us build a tomorrow free of Non Communicable Diseases.