

Men's Health: Findings of Focus Group Discussion

Summary of Report – The General Male Population

Men's Health Programme, Non-communicable Disease Division, Surveillance and Epidemiology Branch, Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health, Hong Kong SAR Government

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Introduction

The Department of Health launched a Men's Health Programme (MHP) in August 2002, aiming at improving the physical, mental and social health and well being of adult men aged 18 or above in the community.

The MHP commissioned ACNielsen to conduct a marketing research study targeting Chinese men aged 18 – 69 in October 2004 by using focus groups to gather men's opinions on different health-related issues so as to provide inputs for structuring and enhancing this health promotion programme in the future.

The study included 20 focus groups with each composed of 8 men. The organization of the focus groups was based on two dimensions: age and occupation. The age variables were categorized into four groups: 18-24, 25-34, 35-49, and 50-64 years. The occupation variables included blue collar, white collar, professional, manager, executive and business (PMEB), professional drivers and three economically inactive groups, namely student, retired and unemployed.

After reviewing all video/audio tapes, notes jotted during the focus groups and the verbatim transcripts, thematic analysis was undertaken to identify similarities and differences between different age and occupation groups as well as within groups if necessary.

Specifically, this report aimed to describe:

- how men perceive their own health status
- how they perceive different health-related issues, namely
 - Exercise
 - Diet
 - Alcohol drinking
 - Smoking
 - Road safety
 - Stress
 - Safer Sex
 - Help seeking
- their behaviours towards the above health-related issues
- the barriers preventing them from practicing healthy habits in the above aspects

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Key Findings

1. Perception Towards Health Condition

By using a 10-point scale with '1' being 'not healthy at all' and '10' being 'perfectly healthy', men were asked to rate their current and previous health condition.

1.1 Current Health Condition

Men across all age segments normally rated their own health conditions with a score of 6 to 8. Often men deducted points for bad habits like smoking, binge drinking, long working hours and going to bed late at night

1.2 Comparison with Health Condition 3 Years Ago

Compared to the scores of 3 years ago, no definite trend is observed across age or different occupation groups. In general, three situations occur:

- Lower score than 3 years ago: health condition is deteriorating as age increases
- Higher score than 3 years ago: had health problem before but now recover
- Same score as 3 years ago: health condition is maintained due to good habits

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Key Findings

2. Perceptions Towards Health-related Issues

2.1 Exercise

Definition of Exercise

- Younger men tended to consider more intense activities as 'exercise'. Some of the symptoms were sweating, faster heart beat and feeling exhausted.
- Unlike younger men, as men getting older (age 25 or above), more men felt that light activities were 'exercise'. They considered 'climbing stairs instead of escalators' and 'getting off the bus earlier' as 'exercise'.

Motivators for Exercise

The reasons for doing exercise were:

- To socialize with others
- To feel good/release tension/relax
- To look good/better physical appearance
- To help enhance work performance
- To maintain body conditions or delay aging
- To heal body problems

Men in all age segments exercised so as to socialize with friends and to feel good. Many men admitted that their interests to exercise were not keen, and they perceived doing exercise as having a social gathering. They enjoyed the get together and chat after exercise.

Barriers for Exercise

Common barriers for not doing exercise included:

- No companion
- Long working hours
- Feeling exhausted after work
- Rather to spend time with wife/kid(s)
- No imminent health problems so no need to exercise
- No facilities nearby

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Key Findings

2.2 Diet

Definition of Healthy Diet

Almost all men across the age segments had quite good ideas of what a good eating habit or a healthy diet was:

- Definite time to take meal
- Definite portion (not too much or little)
- Less sugary or salty ingredients
- Less fatty foods (e.g. pan-fried or deep-fried dishes)
- More vegetables / fruits
- Lots of water

Barriers for Having a Healthy Diet

Working men normally had a large portion lunch. This was largely due to the long working hours, and they needed adequate energy to support the work in the afternoon / evening.

Other barriers for adopting healthy diet were:

- No fixed meal break
- Limited choices offered at the eating places
- Limited eating places near the workplace
- Dining out frequently
- “Healthy food” tastes no good and more expensive
- Dining together with others

Motivators for Having a Healthy Diet

Across all age groups, the key reasons for having healthy diet were to:

- Promote health
- Delay ageing
- Prevent diseases/illness

Misconception

Some men between age 18 and 34 wrongly believed that they could do more exercise at the expense of having unhealthy diet.

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Key Findings

2.3 Alcohol Drinking

Drinking Behaviours

Most men drank alcohol. Normally, they drank alcohol in the premises (e.g. restaurants, karaoke, wedding banquet, bar, etc.).

The most frequently cited alcoholic beverages were beer and red wine. Other types of alcoholic drinks with higher ABV (alcohol by volume), such as cocktail, brandy or tequila, had also been mentioned but drinkers were mostly drank on special occasions.

Motivators for Drinking

Most drinkers drank because they regarded alcohol relaxing, a social lubricant for atmosphere building on happy occasions. With alcohols, drinkers thought that it was easier to achieve a state of 'hyper energy'. For some, drinking alcohol (normally beer) was habitual and they perceived it as a beverage that goes well with foods.

Indicators for Over-drinking

It appears that not many man used quantity of drinks rather than behaviours to judge whether they were drinking too much. The most commonly cited behaviours were:

- Feeling dizziness
- Wanting to throw up
- Unable to walk straight
- Falling insensibly in the street
- Speaking loudly or speak foreign language
- Hangover that causes serious headache and dizziness the next day

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Key Findings

2.4 Smoking

Some still smoked despite the fact that all (both smoker and non-smokers) agreed that smoking is bad for health.

Barriers for Quit Smoking

The smokers were asked whether they had ever considered quitting smoking. Only some of them said yes but they also failed to quit. During discussion, we found that men had some false beliefs related to smoking.

- Those who smoked less than 10 cigarettes a day would regard themselves as light smokers and think that their consumption was so low that smoking would not cause any health problem. Such misconception prevailed among the smokers in all age segments.
- Smoking helps release tension.
- They would gain weight when they quit smoking.
- For those aged 50 and above, they wrongly believed that they were “too old to quit”.

Motivators for Quitting Smoking

Some of the men interviewed were ex-smokers. The factors that motivated them to quit smoking included:

- Urge from significant people, e.g. wives, kids, girlfriends or colleagues
- Health concern
- Experiencing sickness themselves or witnessing severe illness among people around (e.g. high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, respiratory system illnesses)
- Not wanting to spend money on keeping the habit

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Key Findings

Perception of Second-hand Smoking

Smokers and non-smokers across all age segments had heard of the statement '*second-hand smoking is more harmful than first-hand smoking*'. However, many of them (particularly the smokers) had problems in interpreting it.

Compared to non-smokers who were only exposed to second-hand smoke, a few of the smokers felt that more toxins or carcinogens would go into their bodies. Hence, they would not cause more harm to the non-smokers nearby and asserted that this was an "anti-smoking" slogan. Even though some had tried to comprehend the statement, they commonly explained that as 'smokers are more used to the toxins and thus they may have a higher tolerance level against the harm from smoking'.

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Key Findings

2.5 Road Safety

Road Safety - Perspectives of Leisure Drivers

Drivers in younger age groups (aged 34 or below) were more likely than their counterparts in older age groups to drive at speed exceeding speed limits. Drink driving was another major problem among the younger drivers. Generally, leisure drivers were more likely to breach the law after midnight.

Road Safety - Perspectives of Professional Drivers

Generally, professional drivers were very confident in their driving techniques. They felt that most of the accidents happened due to factors outside their control.

- Weather
- Faults of other drivers / pedestrians

Regarding different driving regulations, professional drivers had different degree of compliance:

- *Drink driving*: all professional drivers claimed that they would never drink driving because that would lead to accidents.
- *Speeding*: green minibuses and bus drivers ran on defined schedule and their income largely based on flat salary, thus there was no need to drive fast. On the other hand, taxi, red minibuses and some night shift green minibuses were paid by business turnover (i.e. number of passengers), thus they were more likely to attempt speeding.
- *Use of seat belt*: red minibuses drivers tended not to fasten their seat belts and to loosen their seat belts as they were required to turn their back regularly to collect fares from passengers.

Road Safety - Perspectives of Pedestrians

Almost all men in different age segments admitted that they would cross the road disregarding the traffic light instructions when they were in a hurry and no car was approaching. An effective means emerged during the discussion about making themselves more compliant with the traffic laws was heavy fine for jaywalking. Besides, fencing would make them less likely to jaywalk as well.

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Key Findings

2.6 Stress

Source of Stress

For most men, stress was mainly from work and family while for some students concerns about school performance and job prospects after graduation gave rise to stress. Work-related stress included:

- Meeting targets (e.g. sales target at work)
- Job application/loss/stability - especially important during economic recession
- Job safety (e.g. job with high injury risk)
- Keen competition
- Wanting to be successful for the high achievers
- Support for family and raising kids

Stress Relief

Men had different ways to handle stress:

- Talking with someone
- Doing exercise - ranges from intensive ones for younger men and low impact ones for older men
- Listening to music
- Sleeping
- Going to karaoke/disco
- Watching movie
- Playing computer games/videogames/on-line games
- Surfing the internet
- Taking a vacation/Going to picnic
- Going fishing
- Gambling
- Drinking
- Smoking

Men in all age segments claimed that they would chat with others as their inputs might help to solve the problems. Even the problem could not be solved, at least they felt better after talking to someone. Doing exercise, playing computer/video games were the other most frequently chosen methods to release pressure.

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Key Findings

2.7 Safer Sex

Perception of Safer Sex

For many men, safer sex meant having a single sexual partner. Most men perceived that the use of condom was mainly for contraception rather than prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. There was no need to use condom when they had a stable sex partner such as their wives, girlfriends or even another women (such as concubines). Such views were fairly prevalent across all age groups.

While some men had claimed that condom must be used when having sex with prostitutes, others would not use condom when their sexual partners, the girls/women looked “clean” or had limited sexual partners, or when they were confident that their sexual partners treated them as the only sexual partner.

Correct Use of Condom

Normally, they would put on the condom before having sex (when the penis was erected). However, the opinions were mixed on whether to squeeze the closed end of condom. Some men were not sure about this because they claimed that their sexual partners usually put on the condom for them! In addition, only a few knew that condoms needed to be stored at a proper place – cool and no direct sunlight.

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Key Findings

2.8 Help Seeking

Help Seeking Behaviour

When men had work, family or health-related problems, they would talk to and seek assistance from the following:

- Friends (mostly for work-related problems)
- Colleagues (mostly for work-related problems; some for health-related issues)
- Wife / Girl-friend (health and family-related issues)
- Other family members
- Health care professional (for problems related to physical health)

For those health-related problems, it was very common among men in all age groups that they would take some over-the-counter drugs for the “minor” problems. If problem persisted, they would then go and consult a doctor.

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

The findings from the Focus Group Study revealed that there were various health-related myths as well as barriers to the adoption of healthy lifestyle among men with regards to exercise, diet, alcohol drinking, smoking, road safety, stress, safer sex and help seeking.

To put it simply, there is much room for improvement in the arena of awareness and knowledge among men on these health-related issues. The recommendations and practical tips listed below are intended to help the male population improve on these although they are by no means meant to be an exhaustive list. It is hoped that they will serve as the basic essential information which may stimulate and empower individuals to think of and put into practice the best and most practical ways to achieve better health for themselves.

Exercise – Frequently and Regularly

- Schedule 30 minutes for physical activity each day for at least 5 days a week. One may do it in 2 sessions of 15 minutes each or 3 sessions of 10 minutes each.
- With some modification and some planning you can easily achieve your target. Just remember, they all add up:
 - Walk part of your journey, e.g. get off 1- 2 bus stops earlier and walk.
 - Take the stairs instead of using lift or escalator.
 - At work, get up every hour to stretch your body and your limbs and walk a few steps; slowly stretching your shoulders and your neck if remain seated for a long time.
 - Take a brief walk with moderate speed for 10 minutes during lunch break.
 - Share the house chore.
 - At home, walk around while on the phone.
 - Don't use your remote control for executing commands when watching TV; get up and walk there and do it. Get up and stretch your body during commercial breaks.
 - Exercise while watching TV (e.g. use hand weights, stationary bicycle/treadmill/stair-climber, or stretch).

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

- For activities with your children and during holiday, choose more physical or outdoor activities such as swimming, hiking or other sports.
- Choose physical activities which interest you and are compatible with your daily life.
- Set targets for yourself and reward yourself when you meet the targets.
- Make it interesting; try different sports such as jogging, biking or ball games.
- Think positive. Convince yourself that if you give it a chance, physical activity will increase your energy level; then, try it.
- You can do it before or after work.
- For convenience purpose, you may choose activities that require minimal facilities or equipment, such as walking, jogging, or jumping rope.
- Doing exercise with friends is a healthy type of social gathering.
- Try to invite some friends to start exercise together and motivate each other to stick to it.

Diet – Healthy Eating

- Eat according to the Food Pyramid to obtain the right amount of nutrients and calories to stay healthy.
- Having a daily intake of at least 2 servings of fruit and 3 servings of vegetables as part of a balanced diet:
 - One serving of fruit is approximately defined as 2 pieces of small-sized fruit (e.g. plum), 1 piece of medium-sized fruit (e.g. orange, apple), 1/2 piece of large-sized fruit (e.g. banana, grapefruit), 1/2 cup (1 cup = 240ml) of cut-up fruit (e.g. watermelon), berries (e.g. strawberries) or grapes, 1/4 cup of dried fruit (e.g. raisin), or 3/4 cup of fresh fruit juice.
 - One serving of vegetables is approximately defined as 1/2 bowl (1 bowl = 240ml) of cooked vegetables, sprouts, gourd, mushroom or beans, 1 bowl of raw leafy vegetables, or 3/4 cup of fresh vegetable juice.
- Overall balanced diet is important. Try to “catch up” with various components of a balanced diet in the next meal if they are lacking or insufficient in the last meal.

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

- Dining at home or eating out can be healthy if you choose food wisely:
 - Always order side dishes of vegetables / fruit platter.
 - Limit consumption of fried rice or noodle. Plain rice and noodle or rice vermicelli in soup are healthy choices.
 - Choose fresh lean meat, fish or seafood. Poultry should be skinned before eating. Avoid fatty meat (e.g. roast pork, pork belly and spare ribs), poultry with skin (e.g. roast duck, chicken wings and chicken feet), preserved meat (e.g. barbecued meat, salted or smoked meat, salted fish and salted eggs) and internal organs (e.g. pig's large intestine and chicken gizzard).
 - Choose food that is steamed, boiled, blanched, roasted or baked. Avoid deep-frying food and dishes added with a lot of condiments (e.g. soy sauce, oyster sauce, salad dressing). Also watch out for keywords like “fried”, “deep-fried”, “with spicy salt”, “salted crispy”, “roasted with sauce”, “fried or sautéed in sauce”, etc. These words often hint excessive oil or salt use during preparation.
 - Choose fresh fruit or vegetable juice or unsweetened/low-sugar drinks, such as green tea, soymilk, lemonade, etc. instead of sugary drinks such as milk tea, coffee, fruit-flavoured drinks and soft drinks.
- Bear in mind that exercise is not a substitute for healthy diet. You need both.

Alcohol Drinking – Drink Sensibly

- Social gatherings without alcohol can be just as fun and as enjoyable.
- If you drink, drink sensibly! Absence of symptoms like nausea, vomiting, headache or feeling tipsy does not mean you drink safely.
- Understanding what a “standard drink” means can help you drink more safely.
 - A “standard drink” is the measure of alcohol in unit used to work out drinking levels.
 - The number of units of different types of alcoholic drinks can be calculated as: $\text{Volume of drink (ml)} \times \% \text{ Alcohol} / 1000$

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

- The low risk level for men is no more than 3-4 units a day, and less than 21 units a week.
- Also, there should be at least two alcohol-free days each week.
- Take meals while drinking to slow down alcohol absorption. Do not drink with an empty stomach.
- Always make your first drink during meal a non-alcoholic one.
- Sip your drink slowly and do not gulp.
- Space your drinks with a non-alcoholic drink in between.
- Don't get into rounds.
- Set yourself a maximum number, say two alcoholic beverages, when out for the evening and stick to it.

Smoking – Stop It

- Get support from family and friends; ask them not to smoke around you or ask them to quit with you.
- Wash your clothes to get rid of the smell of smoke.
- Write down the reasons you want to become a non-smoker.
- Each day, postpone the lighting of your first cigarette by one hour.
- Don't empty your ashtrays. This will remind you of how many you HAVE smoked.
- Find activities that make smoking difficult.
- Avoid places where smoking is permitted.
- Put something other than a cigarette into your mouth.
- Stop carrying cigarettes with you at home, in your bag or at work. Don't 'borrow' any, and make them difficult to get to.
- Throw away all your cigarettes and matches. Hide (or trash!) your lighters and ashtrays.
- Think positively - withdrawal can be unpleasant, but it's a sign your body is recovering from the effects of tobacco.
- End meals or snacks with something that won't lead to a cigarette.
- Never allow yourself to think that 'one won't hurt' - it will. It's a slippery slope.
- Decide positively that you want to stop. Try to avoid negative thoughts about how difficult it might be.

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

- Think of the savings - and the treats!
- Make a list of things you'd like to buy for yourself or someone else. Estimate the money saved from packs of cigarettes - and get the pressies!

Road Safety – Safe Your Life and Others'

- Always wear your seat belt.
- Always insist that other passengers wear seat belts.
- Do not drive when you are tired.
- Do not drive under the influence of alcohol or medications.
- Observe traffic rules. Do not speed.
- Pay attention to the conditions on the road.
- Be patient on the roads. Stay cool.
- Don't drive if you are not familiar with how to get to your destinations. Consider public transport instead
- Steer clear of aggressive drivers. Aggressive drivers are as dangerous as drunk drivers.
- As a pedestrian, you should follow traffic rules and pay attention to the traffic. Remember, it is you against the car!

Stress – Manage It

- Learn to identify stress symptoms:
 - constant fatigue and irregular sleep patterns
 - poor concentration and short-term memory
 - increased introspection which is accompanied by neglect of the family and personal appearance
 - constant repetition of the same actions
 - increased irritability
- Avoiding stress triggers sometimes helps.
- Think positively. Stress isn't an illness but an important part of life.
- If avoiding stress is not possible or practical, learning to cope with - or even enjoying – stress or looking at it as a challenge is the best way to deal with it.

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

- Share with family and friends. Talking to them very often helps.
- Exercise is not just a good way to keep fit but it also relaxes your mind.
- Learn and practise self-relaxation techniques.

Safer Sex – Wise Way to Enjoy Sex

- Avoid casual sex.
- Condom should be used when having sex with prostitutes or other casual sexual partners as it is the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases when used properly. This applies to oral sex as well.
- Keep condoms handy at all times. Don't find yourself short of a condom when you most need it.
- You don't have to be embarrassed about buying condoms. It is a responsible act.
- If you are new to condoms, the best way to learn how to use them is to practise putting them on by yourself or your partner. It does not take long to become a master.
- Establish a faithful one to one sexual relationship with your partner.
- Healthy sex life is part of a healthy relationship with your partner, such as your wife or girlfriend. A cordial and fruitful sex life, which builds on good communication, consideration and respect, can reduce your temptation to have casual sex.
- Deciding that someone is "clean" (i.e. free of sexually transmitted diseases) through judging by the look is dangerous, to say the least.
- Don't ever comfort yourself by thinking "I will just do this once and I cannot be that unlucky". Remember, when it comes to unsafe sex, one time is one time too many.

Help Seeking – Early and Promptly

- Problems are part of life and admitting that there is a problem is not a sign of weakness.
- Think positive. There is always a way out.

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Recommendations and Practical Tips

- Talking with others almost always helps. Friends, family and professionals can all help.
- Deal with any problem, be it physical, mental or social, early.
- Make good use of primary health care services. Men tend to under-utilize primary health care services.

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