



MEN AT WORK

Maverick Saravanamuthu, Conrad Pinto and Mustafa Mohd talk about why they decided to get healthy — and how they plan on staying that way. BY GENE KHOR & FAIROZA MANSOR

MAVERICK SARAVANAMUTHU, 42 FITNESS PROFESSIONAL

"I've led an active lifestyle for as long as I remember, having played rugby and soccer in secondary school and junior college. But after my father died at age 62 from a heart attack in 1988, the motivation to get fit was even stronger. It was his second heart attack too — the first one was when he was 35 — and he had also been battling diabetes for many years.

It's not just my father. There's a history of heart disease on my mother's side as well, with her father succumbing to a heart attack as well. Although he didn't smoke, he drank a lot and didn't exercise, which contributed to his condition. I understood that the risks of contracting heart disease and its related ailments are higher for me because I am probably genetically predisposed to it.

When I started hitting the gym, I tried to convince my mum and two sisters to get in on it as well. They were quite resistant and this actually motivated me to train harder. I felt that as a role model, showing them the results of exercise would be more convincing than forcing them.

It wasn't just my family I was trying to help. I had also started coaching the regulars at the gym I frequented, giving them advice on the kind of exercises to do and what to eat based on the personal research I had done. I realised that guiding people towards a healthier lifestyle was something I enjoyed doing. So in 1991, I enrolled in a course at the Singapore Sports Council, and was in their pioneer batch of fitness instructors.

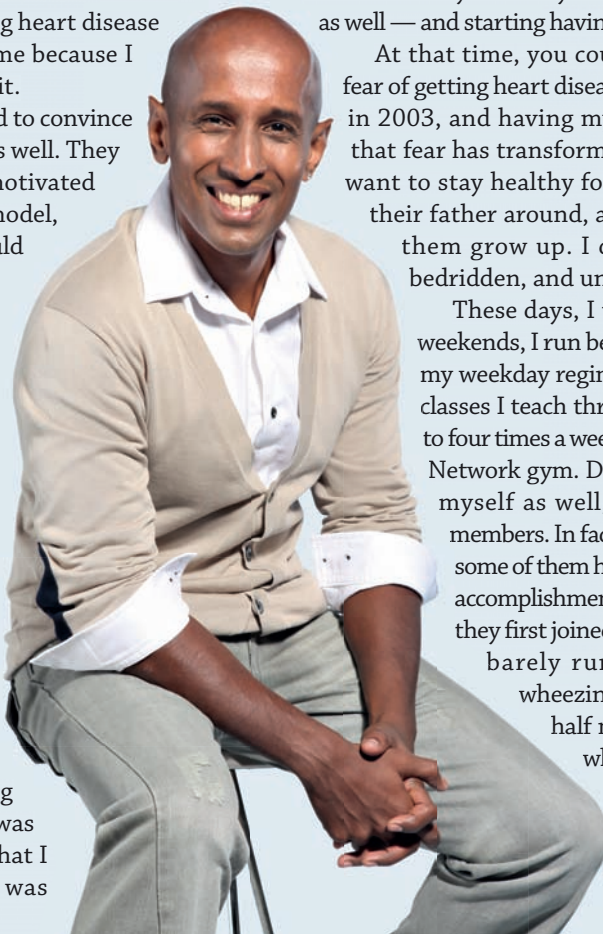
Wanting to keep track of my health levels, I started going for annual health screenings. The initial screenings never indicated that there was anything wrong with me, but the one I went for in 1997 was another matter — my doctor revealed that I had high cholesterol levels. Though I was

training regularly, I had taken one important component of my lifestyle for granted — my diet. I thought I could eat anything I wanted because I was burning off enough calories through my exercise and remained slim. Whether it was fried or junk food, I didn't care — in fact, my favourite meal was the egg *prata* I had every morning.

For the next month, I took stock of what I ate. I discovered that I wasn't consuming enough fibre to help lower cholesterol levels in the blood. I also learnt that you can still have setbacks if you don't watch what you eat, especially if you have a family medical history like mine. I cut out all the unhealthy parts of my diet like the oily and fatty foods — and yes, the egg *prata* as well — and starting having more vegetables and fruits.

At that time, you could say I was driven by the fear of getting heart disease, but after getting married in 2003, and having my two sons (aged 5 and 3), that fear has transformed into a higher purpose. I want to stay healthy for my family. My sons need their father around, and I want to be able to see them grow up. I don't want to be sick and bedridden, and unable to play with them.

These days, I train five times a week. On weekends, I run between 16km to 20km, while my weekday regime comes from the different classes I teach three to four times a day, three to four times a week at the Science Park's Fitness Network gym. During these classes, I'll push myself as well, so as to inspire the gym members. In fact, I consider the progress that some of them have made as one of my biggest accomplishments. There are a few who, when they first joined around two years ago, could barely run 3km before giving up, wheezing. But now, they're running half marathons! It's these people who inspire me to wake up and go to work, because they're clear examples of how I'm making a difference to peoples' lives."



CONRAD PINTO, 59**ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SAFETY MANAGER**

“Back in secondary school, I often played soccer with my friends. Though I was also in the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and would jog once a week as well, none of this was done with the mindset of having a healthy lifestyle. I merely regarded them as different opportunities to spend time with my friends.

I did my National Service (NS) in the early 70s. The Basic Military Training phase was tough, but we all came out of it leaner and stronger. However, it was also then that I picked up smoking due to peer pressure. I smoked up to 20 sticks a day.

I got married in 1976, and my wife became pregnant a year later. Having read about the harmful effects of second-hand smoke, I decided to quit smoking for the sake of my unborn child. I went cold turkey, and have not touched a single cigarette since. The hardest part of quitting was making the decision to, but once I did, the rest was easy. Food began to taste better as the cigarette smoke wasn't deadening my taste buds anymore. But I began to eat more, and ended up putting on extra kilos in the process.

In 2003, I read in the newspapers about how men my age should go for annual health screenings. So I did, and felt pretty good about myself when I was given a clean bill of health that year. But my test results in 2005 were another story. A blood test done because of above-normal blood sugar levels that year revealed that I had type 2 diabetes. The doctor explained that my body's insulin was unable to keep my blood sugar levels stable. He added that I might have to take medication three times a day for the rest of my life in order to keep them within a normal, healthy range.

After the initial shock I became anxious when I thought of the consequences. I had seen firsthand the effects of this condition — my father had diabetes for 12 years before losing his sight to it at 61. And in the mid-1990s, a subordinate at work had both his feet amputated because of it. But these examples also helped me realise that I needed to do something to overcome my situation. I didn't fancy taking medication for the rest of my life because I felt that rather than solving the problem, I'd just be treating the symptoms.

I attributed my condition to not controlling my diet, especially at work. My job involves going overseas a fair bit and I'd stay in hotels which usually offered a buffet spread at their restaurants. I couldn't help but indulge — and that's why I weighed 80kg in 2004-2005.



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After doing some research online, I decided to reduce my carbohydrate intake by half. I switched to brown rice. As a complex carbohydrate, brown rice breaks down more slowly than white rice, so it doesn't cause my blood sugar levels to spike. I also confined myself to three meals a day, ate more fruits and vegetables, and stopped snacking completely. Needing to burn off the calories, I intensified my jogging sessions from once a week to around four. I would also train at the office gym during lunch.

Six months after my health screening, this regime helped me lose 14kg. And better yet, when I went to see the doctor again, he was surprised to find my blood sugar levels back to normal. He even invited me to speak to his patients about how I did it. I no longer need to take medication as my body is able to efficiently burn up the glucose.

The recovery has really spurred me on to continue my regime. Now when I travel, I make it a point to visit the hotel's gym. And if clients want to bring me out, I will control how much I consume. I usually won't take rice, and when they ask me why, I tell them I'm allergic!

Since 2005, I've downsized my wardrobe twice, and also find that my reflexes have improved greatly. Wanting to challenge myself further, I decided to take part in marathons. My first was the 10km route of the Sheares Bridge Run and Army Half Marathon in mid-2007, and later that year I took part in the Standard Chartered Marathon in the 21km category. I've been doing it every year since.

I've come to realise that being older doesn't mean you can't be active. You shouldn't take your body for granted either, and should always be aware of symptoms that seem out of the ordinary.”