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1 in 5 young Malaysians face higher diabetes risk

Why diabetes is no longer just an older person's problem

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For years, diabetes has carried the reputation of being an "older person's disease", something to worry about later, after decades of unhealthy habits or retirement-age check-ups.

But new local findings from Sun Life Malaysia's Blood Glucose Screening Programme suggest that this assumption no longer holds true.

Recent data shows that nearly one in three Malaysians now has elevated blood sugar levels, a figure that aligns with national health trends and mirrors previous years.

While older adults still make up the bulk of cases, what stands out is the growing number of younger people quietly joining the at-risk group.

Among those screened, about one

in five Malaysians aged between 18 and 40 showed signs of prediabetes or diabetes. This age group, often seen as being in the prime of life, is increasingly facing health risks once thought to appear much later.

The trend echoes national health surveys and underscores a worrying reality: diabetes is no longer waiting for middle age.

Lifestyle habits appear to be a key driver behind this shift.

Sugary drinks, long a staple in many Malaysian diets, are emerging as one of the biggest contributors.

More than half of participants reported consuming sweetened beverages at least three times a week.

Among those who reached for sugary drinks daily, the majority recorded elevated blood sugar levels.

The contrast was telling. Participants who limited sweetened drinks to once or twice a week or avoided them altogether were far more likely to maintain healthy blood glucose levels.



PHOTO: CANVA

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It's a reminder that everyday choices, often made without much thought, can quietly shape long-term health outcomes for individuals and families alike.

Physical inactivity paints a similar picture. Despite growing awareness around exercise and wellness, many Malaysians remain largely sedentary.

Most participants reported exercising fewer than three times a week, with inactivity especially common among those with elevated blood sugar.

Yet, the data also offers a note of hope. Regular movement, even simple daily exercise, made a noticeable difference.

Nearly two-thirds of participants who exercised daily maintained normal blood sugar levels, reinforcing that consistent activity, rather than intense workouts, plays a meaningful role in metabolic health.

For families, these findings raise important questions. Busy schedules, screen-heavy lifestyles and convenience-driven food choices are shaping habits earlier than ever, often without families realising the long-term consequences.

When health issues emerge in young adulthood, they don't just affect individuals, they ripple through households, finances and future plans.

Simple shifts like choosing water over sweetened drinks, moving more as a family, and treating health screenings as routine rather than reactive can help reverse the trend.

Diabetes may be rising quietly among younger Malaysians, but it is not inevitable. Awareness, and small daily choices could make a difference between a future shaped by chronic illness and one built on healthier foundations.