

S'poreans' risk of heart failure higher than other Asians: Study



A teenager diagnosed with diabetes gives herself an injection of insulin at her home. AP file photo

SINGAPORE — Singaporeans have a higher prevalence of coronary artery disease, hypertension, and diabetes — three medical conditions that put them at greater risk of heart failure than their Asian counterparts — a study showed.

Of the 1,066 Singaporean patients who took part in the study involving more than 5,000 patients across 11 Asian regions, 62 per cent of Singapore's cohort had coronary artery disease, 70 per cent had hypertension and 58 per cent had diabetes.

This is higher than the Asian average of 50 per cent for coronary artery disease, 52 per cent for hypertension, and 40 per cent for diabetes.

However, these risk factors can easily be changed, Associate Professor Carolyn Lam said. The principal investigator of the study and a senior consultant at the department of cardiology in National Heart Centre Singapore (NHCS), she said: "Most of us will be able to lower our risk of developing heart failure if we keep to a healthy lifestyle through a sensible diet and regular exercise."

She also pointed out that Singaporean patients suffer from heart failure at the average age of 61, about 10 years earlier than Americans and Europeans. This data was taken from studies on American and European patients done some 10 years ago.

The new study, initiated by the National University Heart Centre Singapore (NUHCS), in partnership with NHCS, involved 50 centres in Asia.

Overall, Southeast Asia has a high prevalence of the three medical conditions, compared to South Asia and Northeast Asia.

Assoc Prof Lam put the trend down to the region's social and economic advancement, leading to lifestyle changes that triggered the risk factors.

"When we compare Chinese patients (in the region) with heart failure from higher-income families, to those from lower-income families, they are found to have three times higher the odds of getting hypertension. Similarly, Indian patients with higher income have four times higher the odds of getting hypertension, and more than five times higher for diabetes," she said.

The study, started in 2012, gathered data on the demographics and risk factors of heart failure patients from China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

It compared the three risk factors of heart failure across geographic regions, regional income levels and ethnicity.

Among the three races — Chinese, Indian and Malay — the study found that Malays had the highest prevalence of the three risk factors: 62 per cent of Malays had hypertension, compared to 57.5 per cent for Chinese, and 42.5 per cent for Indians.

For diabetes, it was 50.2 per cent for Malays, 40.9 per cent for Chinese and 42.1 per cent for Indians.

Asia has the lion's share of patients with heart failure in the world, and the condition accounts for around 6,000 hospitalisations annually in Singapore alone.

In Southeast Asia, there are nine million heart failure patients, compared to six million in the United States.

Researchers plan to follow up with the heart failure patients from the study for the next two to three years, for further observation.

In April this year, Singapore's Health Ministry declared "war" on diabetes, a growing problem here. Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said then that dealing with diabetes costs the Government more than S\$1 billion a year.