



The HEALTH



HEALTHCARE AT THE CROSSROADS

The RM46.5 billion allocation to the Ministry of Health under Budget 2026 underscores the government's intent to strengthen Malaysia's public healthcare system — but also reveals the limits of fiscal space and the urgency of reform. **p08-09**



From ground playgroups to tablets

- Malaysian children are experiencing rising rates of vision problems due to extended screen time and reduced outdoor activities - **P12-13**

HIV: Breaking barriers

- HIV remains one of the world's most persistent health challenges, with stigma and late testing hindering prevention efforts. - **P16-18**

Conditioning and prevention

- Conditioning is about preparing the body to handle the demands of sport. Strong muscles, joints, and ligaments help prevent common injuries, such as sprains and strains. - **P24**



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Dual shocks ahead

Starting July 1, 2025, a six per cent service tax will apply to private healthcare services for non-citizens, raising concerns about compliance, billing, and access, especially for foreign workers.

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From playgrounds to tablets

Malaysian children are experiencing rising rates of vision problems due to extended screen time and reduced outdoor activities

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Vision for children

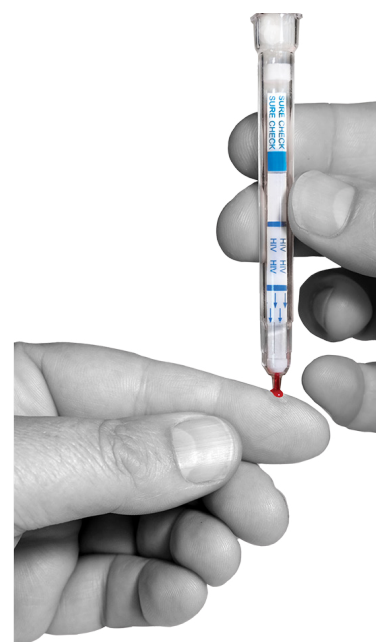
Alarming rise of myopia in children calls for customised treatment solutions to safeguard their visual health



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Halal vaccines: From vision to action

Halal compliance should not be treated as a downstream certification issue but embedded from the earliest stages of vaccine research and development.



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HIV: Breaking barriers

HIV remains one of the world's most persistent health challenges, with stigma and late testing hindering prevention efforts.

SMART PARTNERSHIP



The surprising science behind fitness

- Exercise triggers beneficial changes across every system in the body — strengthening the heart, sharpening the brain, and even influencing gene expression for longevity and resilience.
- Regular physical activity not only boosts immunity and emotional balance but also nurtures a diverse gut microbiome, which plays a crucial role in mood, digestion, and inflammation control.
- In Islam, physical strength and vitality are part of spiritual stewardship. Caring for the body is an act of worship — a way of honouring the divine trust and achieving a Tayyib (pure, balanced) life.



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IN today's fast-paced, high-pressure world, fitness is often viewed as a means to lose weight or achieve the perfect body. But that is only a fraction of the story.

A growing body of scientific research now reveals that physical activity is not just about looking good; it is one of the most powerful drivers of overall health, from cellular regeneration and brain plasticity to immune defence and gut ecology.

Exercise does not just make you feel better. It rewires how your body functions, right down to your DNA. Let us explore how moving your body boosts cardiovascular strength, enhances brain function, reinforces your immune system, balances your microbiome, and even influences gene expression.

FITNESS FOR GENERAL HEALTH

Most people know that exercise is good for the heart. But do they know how good? Regular physical activity strengthens the heart muscle, making it more efficient at pumping blood and delivering oxygen to tissues.

It lowers resting heart rate, improves blood pressure regulation, and helps control cholesterol levels by increasing HDL (the "good" cholesterol) and lowering LDL (the "bad" type). Even moderate activity like brisk walking for 30 minutes a day can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes by up to 35 per cent (CDC, 2024).

Beyond this, exercise helps manage body weight, reduces dangerous visceral fat (the fat that wraps around organs), and improves insulin sensitivity; all key factors in preventing metabolic syndrome and fatty liver disease.

What is more, physical activity triggers anti-inflammatory responses in the body, reducing systemic inflammation. This matters because chronic inflammation is a silent culprit behind many diseases, including arthritis, cancer, and Alzheimer's (Min et al., 2024).

A 2022 study published in *Obesity Reviews* found that older women who regularly do resistance exercises (such as lifting weights or using resistance bands) have much stronger bones in their lower back and hips. Stronger bones mean they are less likely to break, helping them stay active and enjoy a healthier, more independent life as they age (Lopez et al., 2022).

Getting some exercise can definitely make you live longer. The 2018 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend moving at least 150 minutes of fast walking or 75 minutes of running each week, which can cut your risk of dying young by about a third.

FITNESS FOR BRAIN HEALTH

Have you ever noticed how much clearer your mind feels after a workout? There is a reason for that. Physical activity prompts the brain to release a cocktail of mood-boosting chemicals (endorphins, dopamine, serotonin) that lift your spirits and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

But the brain benefits do not stop there. Over time, regular aerobic exercise increases the size of the hippocampus, the brain region responsible for memory and learning. A study published in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* found that even short-term exercise programs can trigger brain changes linked to improved cognitive function in older adults (Babaei & Azari, 2022).

Major cohort studies, like the UK Biobank and Swedish longitudinal studies, have also found that those who stay physically active into midlife and beyond are significantly less likely to develop dementia, even if they carry genetic risk markers.

One remarkable study showed that women with high fitness levels had an 88% lower risk of developing dementia, and when they did, the onset was delayed by nearly a decade. Whether you are hitting the gym or simply taking the stairs more often, you are indeed helping your brain stay sharper and healthier for long (CDC, 2024).

FITNESS AND IMMUNITY

Physical activity does not just make you stronger; it makes your immune system smarter. Regular exercise enhances the circulation of white blood cells and antibodies, improving your body's ability to detect and respond to pathogens. It also helps flush bacteria from the lungs and airways, lowers inflammation, and reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which can suppress immune function when chronically elevated (CDC, 2024).

Studies show that moderate exercise can reduce the frequency and severity of colds and other infections. The keyword here is moderate. While 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity per week (plus two sessions of strength training) is ideal, overtraining or excessive endurance workouts without recovery can temporarily weaken the immune response. Movement acts as a daily tune-up for your immune system, keeping it responsive, balanced, and resilient.

FITNESS ON A MOLECULAR LEVEL

One of the most exciting frontiers in fitness science is the field of epigenetics, which refers to the study of how behaviours and environmental factors can modify gene expression without altering the underlying DNA sequence. It can be thought of as turning genetic 'switches' on or off.

Exercise influences these epigenetic mechanisms, such as DNA methylation and histone modification, which in turn regulate how genes related to inflammation, metabolism, and brain function are expressed. For instance, research has shown that regular physical activity can switch off genes associated with chronic disease risk and turn on genes related to longevity and insulin regulation.

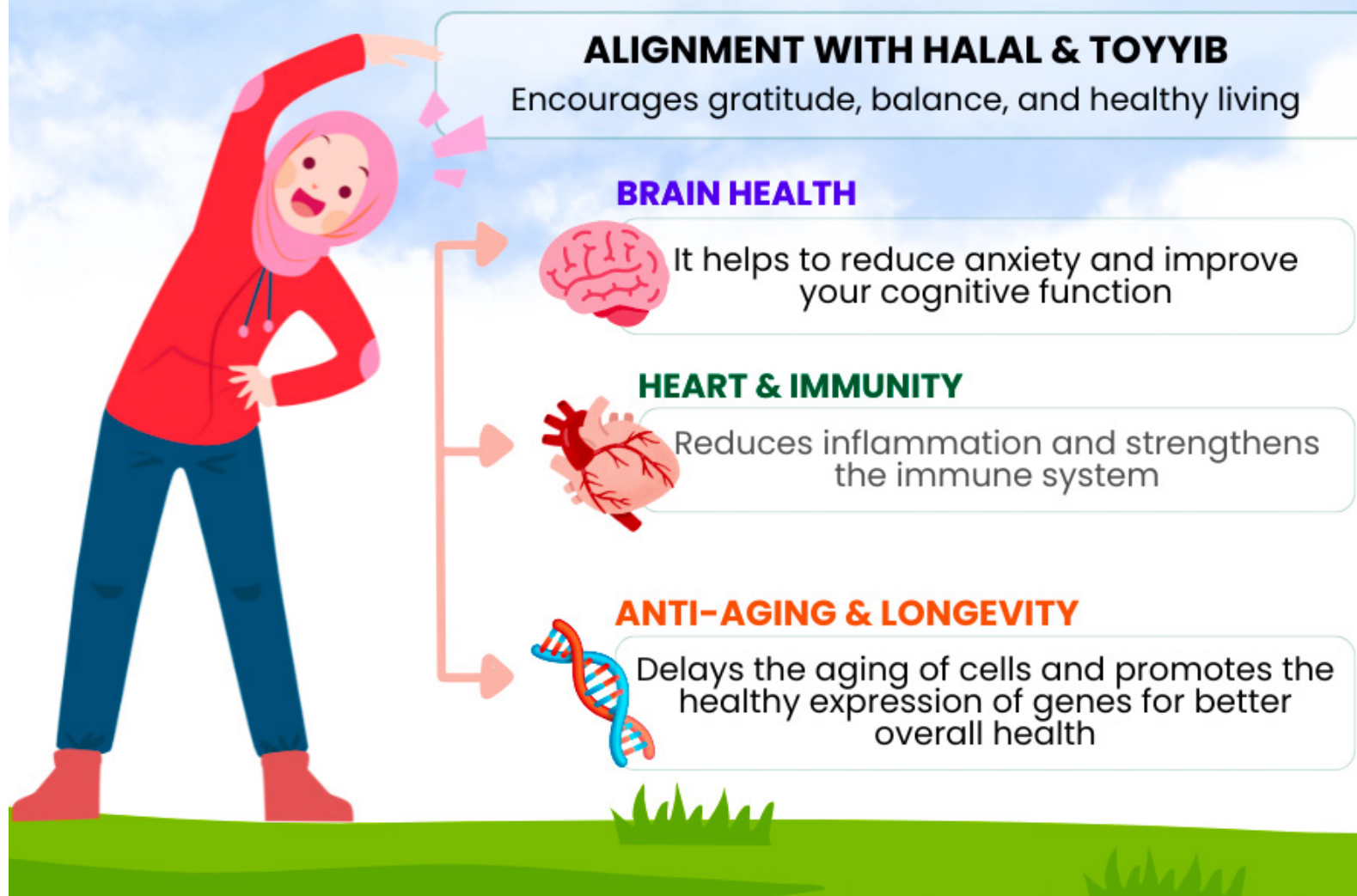
One remarkable 14-week study found that exercise changed how certain genes linked to Alzheimer's disease behave in older women. This growing evidence shows that your daily walk or workout is not just good for you today; it is also helping your



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HOW REGULAR MOVEMENT REPROGRAMS OUR BODY & MIND



body age more healthily, right down to the cells (Wagner et al., 2020).

THE GUT MICROBIOME

Our gut is home to trillions of microorganisms that influence digestion, immunity, mood, and overall health. Exercise helps shape this internal ecosystem by increasing the diversity and stability of beneficial bacteria.

Research shows that physically active individuals have higher populations of microbes such as *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii* and *Akkermansia muciniphila*, which are linked to reduced inflammation and better metabolic outcomes (Allen et al., 2018). A review published in *Nutrients* also confirmed that consistent exercise supports microbial balance and gut barrier function, reducing the risk of harmful substances leaking into the bloodstream (Min et al., 2024).

This relationship between movement and gut health also strengthens the gut-brain axis. Since most serotonin is produced in the gut, a healthy microbiome contributes to emotional stability and resilience.

PROPHETIC WISDOM

Long before modern science confirmed these benefits, Islamic teachings emphasised the value of physical strength and activity. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) maintained an active lifestyle, often walking briskly, encouraging archery and swimming, and emphasising balance in all aspects of life. The Prophet (pbuh) said:

"The strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, though there is good in both." (Sahih Muslim 2664)

This Hadith speaks not only to physical strength, but to strength of

character, discipline, and commitment. Islam views the body as a trust, and caring for it is an act of worship. Movement, therefore, is not just about personal goals but part of living a Halal and Tayyib life—a life that is pure, balanced, and beneficial.

MOVE TO LIVE

In the end, fitness is not a short-term goal or a seasonal trend. It is a lifelong investment in your energy, clarity, strength and even your genetic destiny. One does not need fancy equipment or perfect form to start. A daily walk, a few stretches, a morning swim, they all count.

Every step you take, every bead of sweat, every heartbeat is a message to your body: "I care". And your body, along with your heart, brain, gut, and genes, will respond with resilience, vitality, and balance. - **The HEALTH**

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