

# Scheme gives early help to those at risk of heart problems

**Salma Khalik**  
Senior Health Correspondent

The National University Heart Centre, Singapore (NUHCS) is aiming to reduce the number of people here with serious heart problems by catching and treating patients before their problems blow up.

It is working with polyclinics in its cluster to identify patients who doctors think may be at risk of cardiovascular disease, even if they do not show any symptoms yet.

NUHCS director Tan Huay Cheem told The Straits Times that the patients he wants to access this scheme are those who have a 20 per cent risk of having a heart attack or heart failure within a decade.

For these people, lifestyle changes could do much to delay, or even prevent, a serious cardiovascular problem. Should their arteries get blocked, medicine or ballooning could improve blood flow and prevent problems.

By getting to these people early, Professor Tan hopes to delay, or even prevent, the onset of heart failure or heart attacks.

According to the Ministry of Health, heart diseases are the main cause of serious illness here.

Under the pilot scheme, which began last December, a patient paid only \$20 for a consultation with a cardiologist and an educational session with a physiotherapist.

Prof Tan said further tests, if needed, were also heavily sub-



Mr Kuek Chye Heng doing the exercises recommended by the National University Heart Centre, Singapore. Another exercise he gets - keeping up with his three-year-old grandson, whom he sees twice a week.

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start screening, he said.

Mr Kuek Chye Heng, 67, is one of the patients in the pilot. He has been treated at the Bukit Batok Polyclinic for his diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol for the past five years.

Earlier this year, his doctor there suggested he see a cardiologist at the NUHCS at a very low price.

He was assessed and sent to the preventive cardiology clinic and for a talk on exercise. In the one-on-one session, the physiotherapist took him through a series of exercises.

Mr Kuek, a widower who lives on his own in Clementi, said the physiotherapist told him the exercises would also strengthen his bones.

"She said the exercise will make me stronger so I won't fall easily. If I fall, the bones are stronger, so less likely to break," he said in Mandarin. Now retired, he used to buy old clothes from a karung guni man to sell to Indonesia.

Mr Kuek has been doing the exercises most mornings for half an hour over the past few months.

"The doctor said my blood circulation is better, now that I do all those exercises," he added.

salma@sph.com.sg

sidised and typically cost less than half of what it would if the patient was not in the pilot.

Additional tests can include stress scans, CT scans and even angiography, in which a catheter is inserted

into blood vessels around the heart through which a dye is injected to show if vessels are blocked.

Prof Tan said intervention could start in people as young as in their 20s if they have risk factors such

as high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, are overweight, smoke or have a family history of heart problems.

For people without such chronic ailments, 55 years is a good time to