



YOUR OPINION

E-MAIL: editor@thestar.com.my or
MAIL: The Editor, Menara Star, 15, Jalan
16/11, Section 16, 46350 Petaling Jaya.
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THE Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy calls on the government and local authorities to introduce legislation or official licensing mandates requiring all restaurants, eateries, cafes, food courts, mamak food outlets, fast-food outlets, and licensed food establishments to provide drinking water to customers at no charge.

This is a simple, practical and low-cost public health measure. Access to free drinking water should not depend on whether a customer is willing or able to buy bottled water, a sweetened drink, or a hot beverage.

In a country facing a worsening obesity and non-communicable disease (NCD) crisis, plain drinking water must be made the easiest, most accessible and most affordable choice.

In Malaysia, the problem is not simply that people are eating too much. They are also drinking too much sugar. The National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 found that one in five adults do not drink enough plain water daily, while other national nutrition data show that sugar-sweetened beverages remain deeply embedded in Malaysian diets. Making free drinking water available in all restaurants and licensed food premises would help shift the default beverage choice away from sweetened drinks and towards water.

When free water is not readily available, especially when it is

Make free drinking water mandatory in eateries



Expensive sky juice: A bill showing a charge of RM1.50 for water. The writer says making free drinking water available in all food outlets would help shift the default beverage choice away from unhealthy sweetened drinks and towards water. — Filepic/The Star

highly priced, customers are nudged towards sugar-sweetened beverages, flavoured drinks, carbonated drinks, milk teas, juices, and other high-calorie options. This is especially concerning for children, adolescents, low-income families, and people who regularly eat outside the

home such as shift workers.

More than half of Malaysian adults are now overweight or obese. One in five are living with diabetes. More children are becoming obese. Obesity increases the risk of metabolic diseases such as diabetes and liver disease, heart disease, stroke, kid-

ney disease, cancer, and premature death. It also increases health care costs for families, employers, insurers, and the public health system.

A requirement for free drinking water would not solve the problem of NCDs. However, it is an important baseline measure. It sends a clear public health signal that water is the default beverage, not an optional extra. It supports Malaysia's broader efforts to reduce sugar intake, strengthen food environments, and prevent NCDs.

Other countries have already shown that this is possible. Spain requires bars and restaurants to offer free tap water. In the United Kingdom, licensed premises that serve alcohol must provide free tap water on request where reasonably available. In parts of Australia, liquor-licensed premises are required to make drinking water available to patrons. In India, consumer protection regulations ensure that customers are not forced to buy bottled water when potable drinking water can be provided.

Malaysia should learn from these examples and adapt them to local conditions. The requirement should apply broadly to food establishments licensed by local authorities. It should be included as a condition for business licensing, and food handling certification.

Customers should not have to pay extra just to choose the healthiest drink. Making free drinking water available in restaurants is one of the simplest public health interventions we can implement. It is practical, affordable and fair. We can do it today. Let's make the healthy choice the easy choice.

The Galen Centre urges the Health Ministry, the Housing and Local Government Ministry, local councils, and state governments to work together to introduce this requirement through legislation, licensing conditions, or food establishment regulations.

AZRUL MOHD KHALIB
Chief executive officer
Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy

Govt urged to take action on synthetic drugs

KUALA LUMPUR: The Alliance for a Safe Community has urged the government to implement a comprehensive national response to address the growing abuse of synthetic drugs.

Its chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye said the matter was particularly linked to vape products, accounting for 73% of drug abuse cases and contributing to worsening mental health problems among youth.

He added that data from enforcement agencies showed the trend had become a serious public health, mental health and social crisis requiring urgent intervention.

"Unlike conventional drugs, synthetic drugs are manufactured using dangerous chemical compounds that are often far more potent and unpredictable. Their effects on the brain could be devastating.

"Frequent use could damage brain function and alter normal chemical activity, increasing the risk of severe mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, paranoia, hallucinations, psychosis, violent behaviour, and in some cases, long-term schizophrenia-like symptoms."

Lee said many young individuals were unaware that substances inhaled through vape devices could rapidly impair judgment, damage the brain and trigger serious psychiatric conditions, while the discreet appearance of the devices made enforcement more challenging.

He added that the condition, commonly referred to by medical experts as a dual diagnosis, in which an individual simultaneously suffers from substance use disorder and a mental illness, was more difficult to treat because both conditions reinforced each other.

To tackle the problem, Lee called for tougher nationwide enforcement against the manufacture, trafficking, online sale and distribution of synthetic drugs, especially those concealed in vape liquids and cartridges, as well as stronger border controls to curb the smuggling of synthetic drug precursors.

He also urged the government to expand awareness campaigns in schools, colleges and universities, strengthen mental health screening for individuals undergoing drug rehabilitation, and enhance collaboration among the National Anti-Drug Agency, Health Ministry, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies and mental health professionals.

Lee also called on parents and teachers to recognise early warning signs of drug abuse and mental health problems, while urging the authorities to review existing laws on vape products to prevent them from being exploited as a delivery system for dangerous synthetic substances.

"Drug rehabilitation today must go beyond treating addiction alone.

"It must also address the psychological and psychiatric consequences of synthetic drug use.

"Without integrated treatment, many recovering addicts will remain vulnerable to relapse, self-harm, violence, homelessness and involvement in crime." – Bernama

SHARP RISE IN DENGUE DEATHS

Rapid development main cause of surge in cases up to June as authorities step up vector control

KUALA LUMPUR

DENGUE cases have increased significantly this year, while deaths have risen sharply.

Health authorities, however, said the outbreak remains under control.

Malaysia reported 38,854 dengue cases up to June 27 — up 29.1 per cent from the same period last year.

The Health Ministry said deaths increased from 18 to 30, which it attributed to the dominant dengue virus serotype shifting from DENV-2 to DENV-3, alongside urbanisation, climate factors, persistent mosquito breeding sites and increased population movement.

"In terms of dengue-related mortality, 30 deaths have been reported up to the same date in 2026 compared with 18 deaths in 2025, representing an increase of 66.7 per cent," a ministry spokesman said.

"The ministry does not base its public health interventions on fear, but rather on data-driven

assessments and scientific evidence," he said when asked if the situation could worsen.

The spokesman said the ministry was monitoring the situation and had activated surveillance and response systems at all levels.

While cases have increased, he said, epidemiological assessments showed no unusual deviation from the country's dengue transmission patterns, describing the disease as cyclical.

The rise, he said, was concentrated in several states where rapid development and construction had created conditions conducive to mosquito breeding.

State and district health authorities have been instructed to intensify vector-control operations, including targeted fogging, in priority areas.

Targeted Outdoor Residual Spraying (TORS) has been expanded in selected persistent hotspots, while community-based programmes under the Komuniti Bebas Denggi (KomBeD) initiative have been intensified.

The spokesman said the ministry was strengthening digital surveillance systems to allow earlier detection of transmission patterns and faster response.

It is integrating predictive tools using climate data, rainfall, temperature and geospatial mapping to identify high-risk areas.

He said Malaysia maintained close surveillance cooperation with regional partners, including Singapore and Thailand, as dengue remains a shared public health challenge across Southeast Asia.

Countries in the region face similar ecological and climate conditions that support transmission, and dengue patterns remain broadly cyclical across borders.

However, Malaysia's current incidence rate, measured per population, is higher than that of both Singapore and Thailand, although all countries continue to report cases within manageable ranges.

The spokesman said the ministry continued to exchange surveillance data and best practices with Asean counterparts, stressing that dengue control requires sustained regional cooperation rather than country-by-country comparison.

He said dengue prevention could not rely solely on government intervention.

"It requires individual responsibility to eliminate breeding sites," he said, urging Malaysians to carry out weekly checks to remove stagnant water and to seek early treatment if symptoms appear.

The ministry said existing resources were sufficient to manage the current situation and scale up interventions where needed.

THE CRISIS ENGINE: BEHIND THE 2026 RESURGENCE

CLIMATE CHANGE

Higher heat speeds up mosquito breeding



1. The climate catalyst

Faster incubation: Rising baseline temperatures cause the virus to replicate quicker inside the mosquito.

Aggressive vectors: Warmer weather makes Aedes mosquitoes mature faster and bite more frequently.

Urban breeding pools: Intense, unpredictable monsoon downpours leave stagnant water traps across metropolitan zones.

COLLIDES WITH

DENV-3 STRAIN

A DENV-3 variant enters an unprotected public



2. The DENV-3 wildcard

Immunity gap: Malaysians hold natural antibodies against older DENV-1 and DENV-2 strains, but carry zero defence against DENV-3.

'Trojan Horse' effect: Old antibodies fail to neutralise DENV-3. Instead, they inadvertently help the new virus invade immune cells faster.

Severe complications: This secondary infection pathway is the direct trigger behind the current 43.7 per cent spike in fatalities nationwide.

INFOGRAPHIC NST

FAST DETERIORATION

Doctors: Don't delay treatment as disease can be life threatening

KUALA LUMPUR: Blood soaked through a hospital bed as doctors rushed to save a dengue patient whose condition deteriorated within hours.

The woman's platelet count suddenly crashed during the disease's critical phase, triggering severe bleeding.

As her haemoglobin level fell rapidly, doctors scrambled to stabilise her with repeated blood transfusions.

For Dr Wendy Chong Pei Wen, a consultant internal medicine physician at Columbia Asia Hospital Petaling Jaya, the case remains a stark reminder that

dengue can become life threatening with little warning.

"Her haemoglobin fell from 10 to eight and we had to rush blood products.

"After the first transfusion, her haemoglobin dropped again, so she required another transfusion.

"In total, we gave four packs of blood. Fortunately, she recovered because she was admitted early."

She said not every dengue pa-



Dr Wendy Chong Pei Wen

tient was as fortunate.

As dengue cases continue to rise nationwide, doctors say hospitals continue to treat a steady stream of patients and warn that containing the disease will require more than periodic fogging campaigns.

They say the increase reflects a combination of changing weather patterns, rapid urbanisation, shifts in circulating dengue virus serotypes

and persistent mosquito breeding sites, underscoring the need for stronger public awareness and sustained community action.

One of the biggest misconceptions, Dr Chong said, is that patients believe they are out of danger once the fever subsides.

In fact, the period between the fifth and seventh day of illness is often when doctors become most concerned, as platelet counts can fall sharply, blood pressure may drop and the risk of severe bleeding increases.

"Dengue is unpredictable. It's a dynamic infection.

"You may feel well now, but

that doesn't mean complications won't develop later," she said.

She urged anyone experiencing persistent fever, extreme fatigue, persistent vomiting or difficulty drinking fluids to seek medical attention without delay.

Dr Sai Shankar Gunasingam, a consultant physician and internal medicine specialist at Mahameru International Medical Centre here, said climate change, heavy rainfall and rapid urbanisation were creating conditions that favoured dengue transmission.

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'Dry containers may not be free of mosquito eggs'

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Hot weather accelerates the hatching of Aedes mosquito eggs, while torrential rain creates stagnant water where mosquitoes could breed.

Meanwhile, expanding cities, high-rise housing and construction sites also provide more breeding habitats while bringing more people into close proximity.

Dr Sai said densely populated condominiums were particularly vulnerable because Aedes mosquitoes typically remained within a limited flight range.

"If one person in a condominium is infected, many more people in the same area can become infected because the

mosquito stays within that vicinity."

He warned against assuming that dry containers were free of mosquito eggs.

"People think that because the container is dry, there are no eggs. That's wrong.

"The eggs remain attached to the container, so it must be washed thoroughly instead of simply emptied," he said, noting that Aedes eggs could survive for months before hatching once exposed to water again.

From a broader public health perspective, Professor Dr Jenarun Jelip, a public health medicine specialist and infectious disease epidemiologist, said no single factor explained the rise in



Dr Sai Shankar Gunasingam



dengue cases.

Instead, he said the increase reflected interacting epidemiological, environmental and virological factors.

Among the most significant is an apparent shift in the predominant circulating dengue virus

serotype, which could leave many people susceptible despite having contracted dengue previously.

"Infection with one dengue virus serotype provides lifelong immunity only against that particular serotype," said Dr Jenarun.

"When another serotype becomes dominant, many individuals remain susceptible to infection despite previous dengue illness, while those infected with a different serotype for a second time face a greater risk of developing severe dengue."

CRM risk factors prompt calls for co-screening strategy

THE National Cancer Society of Malaysia (NCSM), in collaboration with Boehringer Ingelheim and the Health Ministry, has launched two policy briefs, calling for urgent national action to strengthen the prevention, detection and management of cardiovascular-renal-metabolic (CRM) syndrome.

The policy briefs identify two key priorities for national action: expanding integrated co-screening to detect interconnected diseases earlier, and strengthening the care continuum to ensure individuals move successfully from screening to diagnosis, treatment and long-term disease management.

The recommendations are based on findings from the NCSM-Boehringer Ingelheim Saring@Komuniti Project, which screened 5,000 individuals from underserved communities in the Klang Valley last year.

The programme revealed a significant burden of interconnected cardiovascular, kidney and metabolic diseases, highlighting the need for an integrated healthcare approach.

Overall, almost all participants

had at least one CRM risk factor.

Boehringer Ingelheim Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia general manager and head of human pharma Cheong Yee Kok says cardiovascular, kidney and metabolic conditions are closely interconnected, sharing common risk factors and amplifying each other's impact.

"Through our collaboration with NCSM, Boehringer Ingelheim is committed to advancing integrated solutions — from co-screening to coordinated care pathways — so that earlier detection leads to better long-term outcomes for patients."

The organisations behind the policy briefs are calling on policymakers,

healthcare providers, employers, community organisations and industry partners to work together to make integrated CRM syndrome screening and care a national priority.

This ensures that those at risk are identified earlier and may receive the care before complications occur.

Malaysia has an opportunity to shift from managing individual diseases separately to addressing cardiovascular, kidney and metabolic health as a connected continuum, says NCSM managing director Professor Dr Murallitharan Munisamy.

Early detection must be matched by coordinated follow-up and long-term care if we are to improve outcomes and reduce the growing burden of chronic disease, he adds.

meera@nst.com.my

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Dadah sintetik, vape ancam kesihatan mental orang muda

Kuala Lumpur: Pertubuhan Ikatan Komuniti Se-lamat (IKATAN) menggesa kerajaan mengambil langkah komprehensif mena-ngani penyalahgunaan da-dah sintetik semakin me-ningkat, terutama yang berkaitan dengan produk vape.

Pengerusinya Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye berkata, ia kini menyumbang 73 peratus daripada kes penyalahgu-naan dadah dan menyum-

bang kepada masalah ke-sihatan mental yang sema-kin buruk dalam kalangan golongan muda.

Beliau berkata, data agensi penguatkuasaan menunjukkan trend itu menjadi krisis kesihatan awam, kesihatan mental dan sosial serius memer-lukan intervensi segera.

"Tidak seperti dadah konvensional, dadah sinte-tik dihasilkan mengguna-kan sebatian kimia berba-

haya biasanya jauh lebih kuat dan tidak dapat di-ramalkan. Kesannya pada otak boleh memudaratkan.

"Penggunaan yang kerap boleh merosakkan fungsi otak dan mengubah aktiviti kimia normal, sekali gus meningkatkan risiko kea-daan kesihatan mental yang teruk seperti gang-guan kebimbangan, kemu-rungan, paranoia, halusi-nasi, psikosis, tingkah laku ganas dan dalam beberapa

kes, simptom seperti ski-zofrenia jangka panjang," katanya dalam satu kenya-taan semalam.

Lee berkata, ramai go-longan muda tidak menye-dari bahan disedut melalui peranti vape boleh men-jejaskan pertimbangan de-ngan cepat, merosak otak dan mencetuskan keadaan psikiatri serius.

"Keadaan itu, biasanya dirujuk oleh pakar peru-batan sebagai "diagnosis

berganda", apabila seseo-rang individu mengalami gangguan penggunaan ba-han dan penyakit mental secara serentak, lebih sukar untuk dirawat kerana ke-dua-dua keadaan itu saling menguatkan antara satu sama lain," katanya.

Bagi menangani masalah itu, Lee menggesa penguat-kuasaan yang lebih ketat di seluruh negara terhadap pembuatan, penyeludupan, penjualan dan pengedaran

dadah sintetik dalam ta-lian, terutamanya yang di-sembojikan dalam cecair dan kartrij vape, serta kawalan sempadan yang le-bih ketat bagi memben-dung penyeludupan pre-kursor dadah sintetik.

Beliau menggesa keraja-an memperluaskan kem-pen kesedaran di sekolah, kolej dan universiti, mem-perkukuh saringan kesiha-tan mental untuk individu menjalani pemulihan.