

Relaxation techniques: Ways to calm your stress

DR TAREQ SALAHUDDIN

Relaxation techniques are a great way to help your quest for stress management. Relaxation is not just about peace of mind or enjoying a hobby. Relaxation is a process that decreases the wear and tear of life's challenges on your mind and body.

Whether you have a lot of stress in your life or you have got it under control, you can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques is not hard. Explore these simple relaxation techniques to get you started on de-stressing your life and improving your health.

The benefits of relaxation techniques

With so many things to do, relaxation techniques may take a back seat in your life. But that means you may miss out on the health benefits of relaxation.

Practicing relaxation techniques can improve how you physically respond to stress by:

· Slowing your heart rate
· Lowering blood pressure

- Slowing your breathing rate
- Reducing the need for oxygen
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension

You may also gain these overall health and lifestyle benefits from relaxation techniques:

- Fewer physical symptoms, such as headaches and back pain
- Fewer emotional responses, such as anger and frustration
- More energy
- Improved concentration
- Greater ability to handle problems
- More efficiency in daily activities

Types of relaxation techniques

Although health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach relaxation techniques, you can also learn some on your own. Relaxation techniques usually involve refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It does not matter which technique you



choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly.

There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

Autogenic relaxation: Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to

help you relax and reduce muscle tension. You may imagine a peaceful place and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

Progressive muscle relaxation: In this technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This

helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation, and you become more aware of physical sensations. You may choose to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.

Visualisation: In this technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. Try to use as many senses as you can, including smells, sights, sounds and textures. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about the warmth of the sun, the sound of crashing waves, the feel of the grains of sand and the smell of salt water. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other relaxation techniques include those you may be more familiar with, such as yoga, Tai chi, music, exercise, meditation, hypnosis, massage.

Relaxation techniques take practice

As you learn relaxation techniques, you will become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment your muscles start to tense. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself. Stay motivated to reduce the negative impact of stress on your body and to experience a greater sense of calm in your life.

And bear in mind that some people, especially those with significant psychological problems and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises, stop what you are doing and consider talking to your health care professional.

A picture says a thousand words

IQBAL MASUD

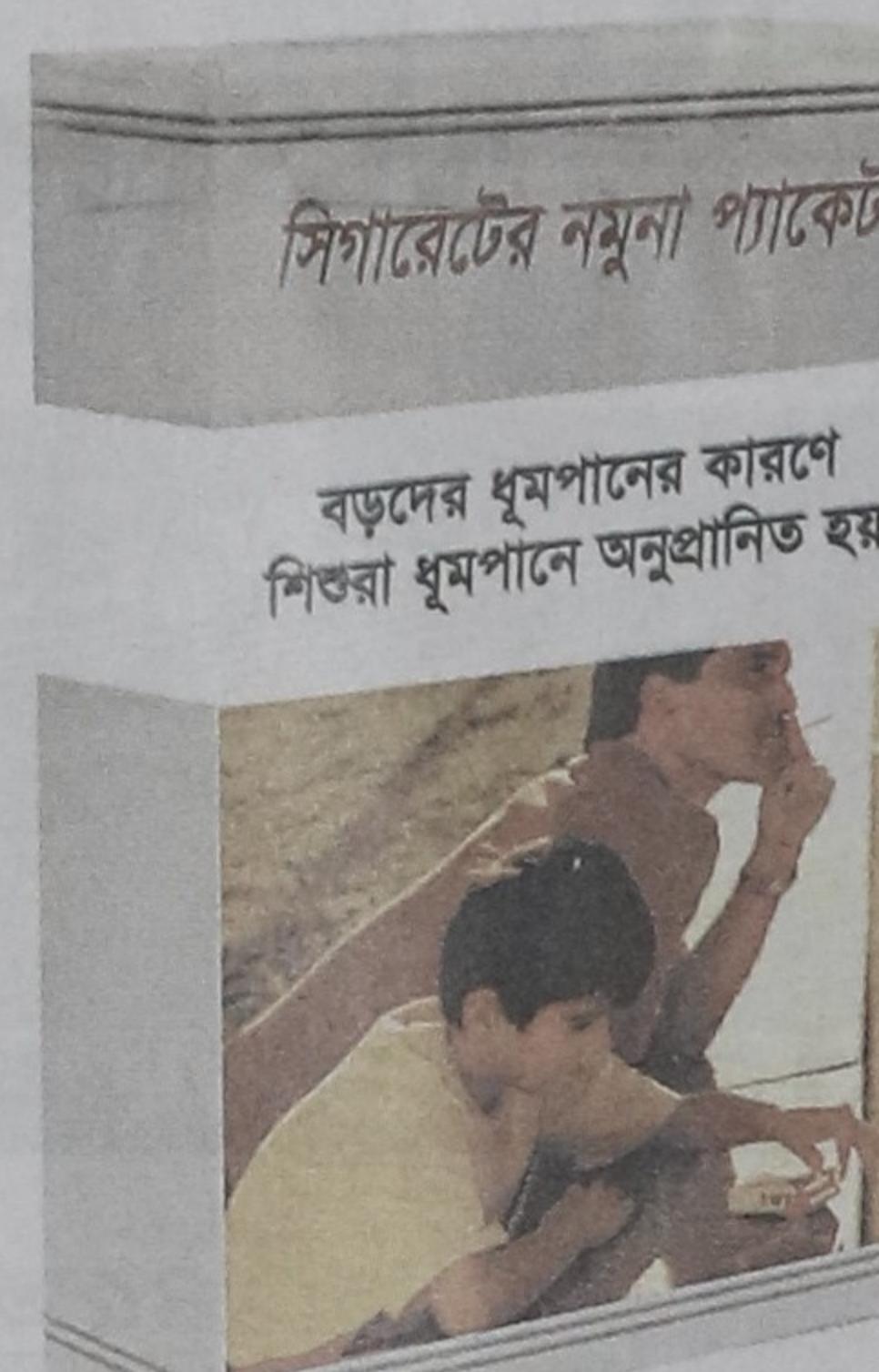
Worldwide, approximately 5 million people die from tobacco related illnesses each year. Every smoker has the right to know the health consequences associated with smoking. And whether literate or not, products need to contain pictorial depictions of the harmful effects from tobacco smoke.

Bangladesh, where one of two adult males are smokers, needs to address these problems. In poor families, tobacco gets priority over food and education.

Health warning labels on tobacco containing packages is an informative and no-cost method in the fight against tobacco use. Photographs enable smokers to visualise the nature of tobacco related illnesses especially for the illiterate.

Currently, under the Tobacco Control Act 2005 in Bangladesh, only written warnings on tobacco products are required to occupy 30 per cent of the main surfaces of the packs. Such warnings include "Smoking Kills" and "Smoking Causes Lung Cancer". Under the FCTC (Framework Convention for Tobacco Control), pictorial warnings accompanied with written messages should account for 50 per cent (front and back) of the total package of tobacco product.

Already, there has been tremendous progress in Bangladesh implementing legislation to mandate pictorial warnings. Seven countries including Thailand, Australia and Singapore require all tobacco containing products to convey health warning pictorials and mes-



A sample of cigarette packet with health awareness image

sages accounting for a minimum of 50 per cent of the total package.

Studies have shown that prominent health warnings and messages on packages have resulted in an increased awareness on health risks and a stronger desire to quit even amongst young smokers. An international comparative study has identified those in countries where health hazards of smoking are depicted on packages are more aware than others of the particular hazard. Other benefits include children of smokers (who are particularly vulnerable to starting smoking) get aware of the risks of smoking as well. Also smokers will continuously be exposed to these images every time they have a smoke.

There are many other issues that need to be raised to deal with tobacco control in Bangladesh. Smokeless tobacco comprises of one third of tobacco consumed is poorly regulated yet.

The evidence that picture-based warnings are more effective than text-only warnings is growing, as is the belief "size matters" when depicted on the package. There are still major shortcomings that need to be addressed in response to tobacco use in Bangladesh.

An introduction of policies including pictorial warning implementations to the standard of FCTC would assist in dealing with tobacco.

Smoking is a health, social, economical and environmental issue that can not be ignored any longer, since it is the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the world. We need to act now.

The writer is a development worker.

Metformin may help obese teen girls lose weight

The addition of the type 2 diabetes drug metformin to a lifestyle modification programme may help female adolescents lose weight loss if they also make dietary changes, according to a new study.

Metformin is primarily used to lower blood sugar in patients with type 2 diabetes.

In the current study, researchers evaluated the effect of adding metformin versus placebo to a programme of personal diet and exercise goal-setting for 85 obese adolescents with insulin resistance, a precursor to diabetes. Of the 85 subjects, 71 percent were female.

Goal-setting alone did not lead to significant weight loss, the research team reports in the *Journal of Pediatrics*.

However, a significant decrease in body weight was seen in girls receiving metformin but not in those receiving placebo. Sixty percent of participants who took metformin as

prescribed and who cut back on their food portion sizes had a decrease in body mass index of more than 5 percent.

"Current options for weight loss medications are fairly expensive and not typically covered by insurance plans," Dr. Kathryn Love-Osborne, of Denver Health and Hospitals in Colorado, who was involved in the study, noted in comments. "As such, medications are not readily accessible to low-income patients who are at higher risk for obesity-related complications."

The availability of a safe, inexpensive medication that might provide added benefit for patients that are motivated to make modest lifestyle changes would be a welcome addition to the options available to primary care providers working to improve the health of obese teens," the researcher concluded.

Source: *Journal of Pediatrics*, June 2008

Sexuality and chronic pain

STAR HEALTH DESK

People need physical and emotional intimacy almost as much as they need food and shelter. Sexuality helps fulfill the vital need for human connection. It is a natural and healthy part of living, as well as an important aspect of your identity as a man or woman. But when chronic pain invades your life, the pleasures of sexuality often disappear.

Where is the old passion?

Sometimes pain is the direct cause of sexual problems. You simply hurt too much or feel too tired for sex. If your pain is so severe that sex seems out of the question, talk to your doctor. You may need a different or stronger pain-control plan.

On the flip side, pain medication may cause sexual problems. Some medicines diminish sex drive (libido) or inhibit sexual function by causing changes in your nervous system. Drugs may also affect blood flow and hormones, two important factors in sexual response.

Relationship problems

Chronic pain can also drive an emotional wedge between you and your partner so that neither of you desires the other very much. Or, if pain has left you unemployed and unable to contribute to housework, your self-esteem could be so battered that you feel unattractive and undesirable to your partner. Awareness that your physical and emotional distance is hurting your partner may add to your anxiety, fear, guilt and resentment.

Sometimes underlying difficulties in your relationship come to the surface when you have a medical problem. If this happens, you may need to explore these previously hidden conflicts with your partner. Counseling may help.

General Pharmaceuticals Ltd. has recently launched Ostocin Cream in the local market, says a press release. The cream is indicated for rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. Arthritis is a common disease, especially in old age. Conventional pain killers taken as medication of the above mentioned disease have

Talk to your partner

The first step in reclaiming your sexuality is to talk with your partner. Sex can be difficult to talk about. Begin your sentences with "I," not "you." For example, "I feel loved and cared about when you hold me close," is much better than, "You never touch me anymore!"

You may think that your partner has stopped touching you because he or she has lost interest, or finds you undesirable. Instead, your partner may be fearful of causing you more physical pain.



Rekindling the spark

You both might spend a few weeks just getting to know each other again. Each of you might do little things that will make the other feel loved. Restoring your emotional intimacy will make it easier to move to the next step of physical intimacy.

Making love creatively

Sexual intercourse is just one way to satisfy your need for human closeness. Intimacy can be expressed in many different ways.

Touch: Exploring your partner's body through touch is an exciting way to express

your sexual feelings. This can include cuddling, fondling, stroking, massaging and kissing. Touch in any form increases feelings of intimacy.

Self-stimulation: Masturbation is a normal and healthy way to fulfill your sexual needs. One partner may use masturbation during mutual sexual activity if the other partner is unable to be very active.

Oral sex: It can be an alternative or supplement to traditional intercourse.

Different positions: Lie side by side, kneel or sit. Look in your library or bookstore for a guide that describes and illustrates different ways to have intercourse. If you're embarrassed to get this kind of book locally, try an online book retailer.

Lubricants: If lack of natural lubrication is a problem, over-the-counter lubricants can prevent pain associated with vaginal dryness.

Plan ahead

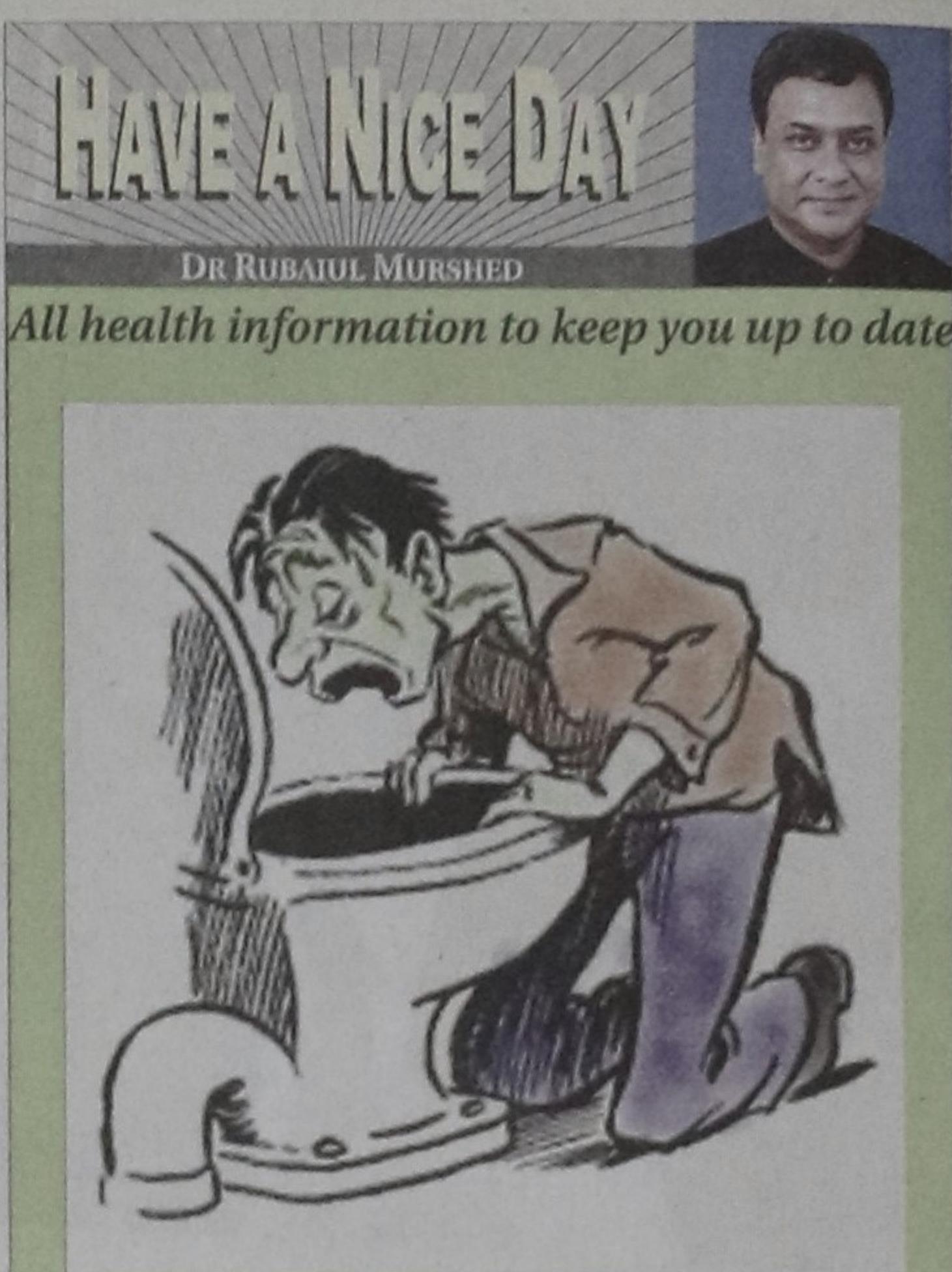
When you feel ready to have sex, plan for it in advance. Make a date with your partner, picking a time of day when you have the most energy and the least pain.

Take your pain medication well in advance, so its effectiveness will peak when you need it. Limit the amount of alcohol you drink and avoid using tobacco in any form. Alcohol and tobacco can impair sexual function.

Give yourself plenty of time to try new things. Try to stay relaxed and keep your sense of humor. Focus on the journey, not the destination.

Worth the effort

Sex can actually make you feel better. The body's natural painkillers, called endorphins, are released during orgasm. And the closeness you feel during lovemaking can help you feel stronger and better able to cope with your chronic pain.



ABC of food poisoning

Food-borne illnesses affect millions of people each year. Foodstuff can cause illness if they contain toxin or poison produced by bacteria growing in food.

Contaminated water can transmit these viral diseases.

Boutelous is a rare but deadly form of food poisoning caused by *Clostridium botulinum*, which is found almost everywhere, including in soil and water. Low acid foods, such as meat, fish, poultry, or vegetables, which are improperly canned, may be breeding grounds for these bacteria.

There is another term known as 'chemical food poisoning'. The poisoning occurs after ingesting poisonous species of mushrooms or plants or contaminated fish or shellfish; some substances are deadly. The most common symptoms are diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting and sometimes seizures and paralysis. Avoiding wild or unfamiliar mushrooms and plants and contaminated fish reduces the risk of poisoning.

Few tips to avoid food poisoning are:

· Wash hands (and dry) thoroughly before having food.

· Wash hands after touching raw meat, seafood, poultry, or eggs before working with any other foods.

· Cook/boil fish, animal meat, and eggs properly before eating.

· Beware of undercooked meat, eggs, crabs, poultry, meat, or unpasteurised milk.

· Do not drink Lassi, Borhani or juicy water for Chatpati/fuski made from unpasteurised milk/ unhygienic water.

· Wash hands after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.

· Always wash your hands after using toilet for any reason.

· Try not use wooden cutting boards for cutting raw fish, poultry, or meat. Plastic boards are easier to disinfect.

· Carefully clean any surface or utensil after each use.

· Avoid cross contamination of foods by keeping cooked foods separate from uncooked meats and raw eggs.

Newest fertility treatment may be a diet!

REUTERS, Washington

The newest low-tech fertility treatment may be a diet, researchers said after learning that obese men have more abnormal sperm and make less sperm.

Their findings, presented at a meeting of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology in Barcelona, Spain, add to recent research showing that obese men are more likely to be infertile.

"We felt that it was possible that male overweight might contribute to fertility problems, particularly since it is a known risk factor for problems in conceiving among women," said Dr. Ghiyath Shayeb of the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

Their study of 2,037 men attending Aberdeen Fertility Centre showed that men with a normal body mass index, meaning they were neither overweight nor underweight, produced higher levels of normal sperm and more sperm than those in the other groups.

"Other studies have suggested an association between male obesity and increased DNA damage in the sperm, which can be associated with reduced fertility as well," Shayeb said in a statement.

"Our findings were quite independent of any other factors and seem to suggest that men who are trying for a baby with their partners should first try to achieve an ideal bodyweight," he added.

He said his team will now compare conception rates between obese and normal men to see if the poorer semen quality correlates with reduced fertility.

"The mechanism for the relationship could be a number of things — different hormone levels in obese men, simple overheating of the testicles caused by excessive fat in the area, or that the lifestyle and diet that leads to obesity could also lead to poorer semen quality," Shayeb said.

"We just don't know the answer yet, but this is an important question that needs urgent attention."