



HER WORLD'S

Health & Wellness

REPORT 2022

DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU STAND
HEALTH-WISE AMONG YOUR PEERS?
THESE ARE THE KEY FINDINGS ON
OUR READERS' PHYSICAL AND
MENTAL HEALTH FROM OUR ANNUAL
WHAT WOMEN WANT SURVEY.



ained weight over the past year? You're not alone. The latest survey by market research firm Ipsos found that 39 per cent of Singaporeans have seen a higher number on the scale since the Covid-19 pandemic, an increase of 9 per cent from 2020.

And you're not the exception if you haven't been as healthy or fit as before: The 2020 National Population Health Survey, jointly conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Health Promotion Board (HPB), noted that there has been a rise in chronic diseases and unhealthy lifestyles as the pandemic continues. Apart from a 50 per cent spike in the number of people with high blood pressure in just two years, there has also been an increase in the diabetes prevalence rate despite a five-year war on the condition. In addition, fewer people have managed to achieve the recommended amount of physical activity.

It is perhaps unsurprising that there has also been an overall decline in mental health among people in Singapore. A 2021 survey by *The Straits Times* found that 76 per cent of the respondents have been feeling sad or depressed since the pandemic started, and another article by the newspaper reported a higher demand for therapy amid these uncertain times.

To find out how our readers are doing, we surveyed over 6,000 women for our What Women Want health and wellness report, in collaboration with consumer research and analytics firm Milieu Insight. We've picked out the key findings, and included resources that we hope will help recalibrate your physical and mental health goals this year.

Physical Health

According to HPB, you should aim for 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every week for a healthier you. Moderate physical activities include brisk walking, dancing and gardening, while vigorous physical activities include jogging or running, fast cycling and fast swimming.

OUR READERS SAID...

66%
Consider themselves somewhat physically healthy

78%
Already started taking supplements before the Covid-19 pandemic

HOW WE PRACTICED SELF-CARE

64%
Make sure to get quality sleep

62%
Exercise regularly

A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE? YES, PLEASE

69%
Wish to be able to exercise more and get good sleep

67%
Want be able to stick to a healthy diet

TIP

Consider collecting a free fitness tracker from HPB and participating in the National Steps Challenge. The device not only tracks your steps, but also your heart rate, sleep and blood oxygen level. The best part? You can earn Healthpoints based on the number of steps you take each day, and then redeem your Healthpoints for shopping vouchers. Visit healthhub.sg for more information.

COMMON CHALLENGES IN MEETING THEM

57%
Do not have the motivation

51%
Just do not have the time

**What's your physical health goal this year?
Write down two achievable steps you can take to meet it.**

THERE HAS ALSO BEEN A RISE IN SLEEP ISSUES SINCE THE PANDEMIC STARTED

50%

Still feel tired despite sleeping sufficient hours

48%

Frequently wake up in the middle of the night

45%

Have irregular sleep schedules despite a hybrid work model

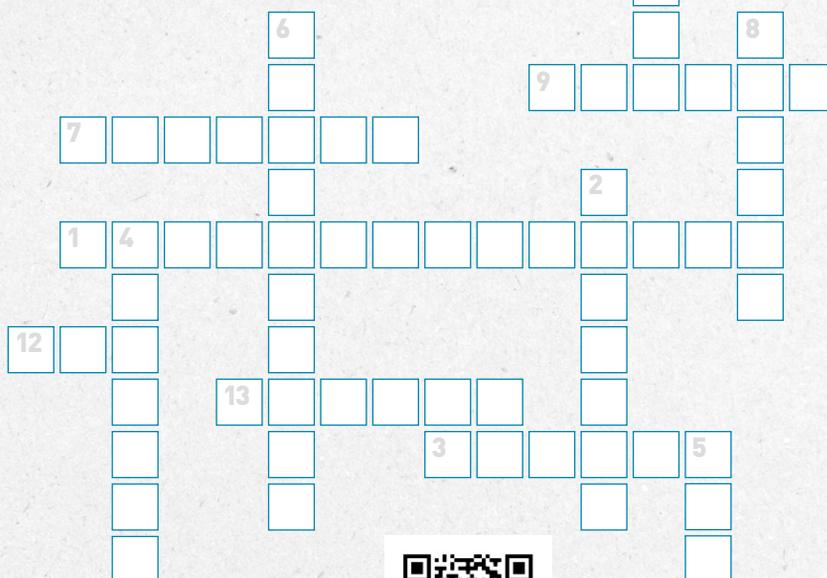


WHY YOU NEED ENOUGH SLEEP

Dr Leow Leong Chai, director of Sleep Disorders Unit and senior consultant, Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine, at Singapore General Hospital, says people who sleep for less than six hours per night on average have reduced life expectancy compared to those who sleep seven to nine hours per night.

He adds that insufficient sleep duration or poor quality sleep has been shown to affect daytime functioning in terms of cognition, decision making and memory, as well as being implicated in causing mood disturbances, weight gain, and many other chronic health conditions.

NEED SOME MOTIVATION TO START MOVING AGAIN? COMPLETE OUR CROSSWORD PUZZLE TO REMIND YOURSELF OF THE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE.



Want to know the answers?
Scan the QR code

ACROSS

- Protects you against _____ disease.
- Reduces _____, which has a big impact on your mood.
- Improves _____ and posture, which is important for preventing injuries.
- Combats the side effects of _____, a group of diseases involving abnormal cell growth.
- Alleviates _____ back pain, which those with sedentary lifestyles typically suffer from.
- Enhances your _____ life, which means higher physical intimacy between you and your partner.
- Boosts your _____, which is what gets you through the day.

DOWNWARDS

- Strengthens _____ and bones.
- Reduces _____ and depression, putting you in a better mood.
- Improves _____ quality, ensuring you get better rest.
- Boosts your _____ level, which heightens your self-esteem.
- Increases _____ and brain function so you retain information better.
- Aids _____, which leads to better bowel movement.

Mental Health

Our mental health affects how we think, feel, act, make choices and relate to others. We can start caring for it by identifying our emotional stressors – things that are constantly making us feel scared, anxious or helpless. If you don't have someone you trust to confide in, you could consider consulting a therapist.

OUR READERS SAID ...



65%

Consider themselves somewhat mentally healthy



43%

Feel like they are pretty balanced when managing it

BUT IT DOESN'T HELP THAT THERE ARE SEVERAL CHALLENGES IN THE WAY



51%

Are inclined to try to resolve their problems before asking others for help



32%

Don't know what they can do to resolve their problems



30%

Aren't sure how serious their mental health issues are



THE TOP FIVE FACTORS AFFECTING THEIR MENTAL HEALTH ARE

- 1 PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES
- 2 FINANCES
- 3 WORK
- 4 FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
- 5 PHYSICAL HEALTH

What is the main factor affecting your mental health at present? List two possible things you need help or support with.

Write down three traits you don't like about yourself, but use positive ways to describe them. For example, someone "obsessive" can also be "passionate". Then, pen three things you like about yourself.

IS ONLINE THERAPY ACTUALLY EFFECTIVE?

There has been a recent boom in online therapy services, no thanks to living in a time of great uncertainty.

"In 2020, we saw an uptick in patients asking our GPs about what they could do about stress and anxiety, and data showed that mental wellness via teleconsult was the most requested service by our users," says Justin Chow, chief marketing and partnerships officer at homegrown telemedicine provider Whitecoat (whitecoat.com.sg).

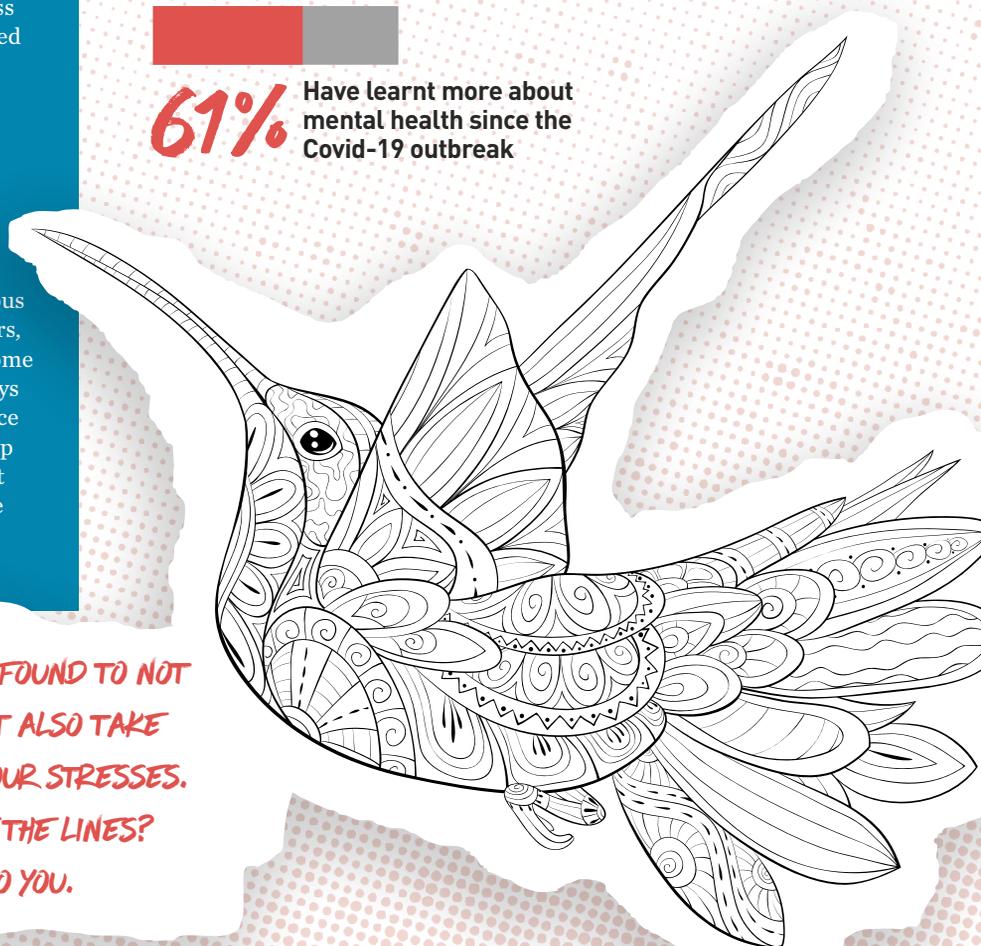
Worried that online therapy might not be as effective? The opposite is true.

"For some people, being anonymous lends them confidence. And for others, being in a familiar space like their home can help them relax and open up," says Lauren Wan, head of client experience at Singapore-based mental health app Lavica (lavica.io). She points out that therapy is also much more accessible when it's as convenient as logging on from the comfort of your home.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH...



ADULT COLOURING HAS BEEN FOUND TO NOT ONLY RELAX THE BRAIN, BUT ALSO TAKE THE ATTENTION AWAY FROM OUR STRESSES. WANT TO COLOUR OUTSIDE THE LINES? GO AHEAD — YOU DO YOU.



Female Technology

Femtech usually involves tracking periods and pregnancy, but is fast expanding to accommodate hormonal health, menopause and sexual pleasure. Some notable Singapore-based femtech start-ups include Zazazu, which offers a membership service for women that curates products and services centred on sexual well-being, and Ferne Health, an online platform that provides home-based tests and consultations for sexual health, particularly for women.

OUR READERS SAID...



52%

Don't use any apps



39%

Use period-related apps



6%

Use fertility- or sexual wellness-related apps



WHY PERIOD-RELATED APPS MAKE TRACKING YOUR PERIODS EFFORTLESS

Here are three popular ones to check out that boast additional features.



Flo

(flo.health – available on the App Store and Google Play)

You can choose from over 70 symptoms, such as bloating, cramping and mood, to input into your log to track the changes you experience during each cycle. It also comes with tons of quizzes, articles and insights that you can browse to learn more about your body.



Eve by Glow

(glowing.com – available on the App Store and Google Play)

It not only tracks your cycle, but also displays your health data in charts. And you can trust that it'll be pretty accurate: The app is compatible with the Health app on the iPhone, which you can use to track your sleep, steps, walking and running, among other things.



Clue

(helloclue.com – available on the App Store and Google Play)

You can not only predict your cycle for up to three months in advance, but also access sexual and reproductive health content available on the app, which includes a podcast called *Hormonal* that explores how our hormones impact bodies and the world around us.

Top Five Concerns in 2022

Will our economy emerge from the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic this year? Will travel resume to what it was before? No one really knows, and it is only natural for us to be afraid of the unknown.

HOW'S THE ECONOMY DOING?

It's understandable that money matters are the biggest concern on most people's minds. In November last year, the Ministry of Trade and Industry said that although there was a 7 per cent gain in gross domestic product growth in 2021, it will slow to between 3 and 5 per cent this year amid an uneven recovery at home and lingering uncertainty over global growth. This is on top of the plan to increase the goods and services tax from 7 to 9 per cent between now and 2025. However, there are measures taken to alleviate the eventual inflation.

"Similar to historic precedence, the government will likely introduce offsetting measures, such as U-save vouchers and S&CC rebates to help cushion the adverse impact, in particular on low-income households," says Yun Liu, an economist at HSBC Global Research.

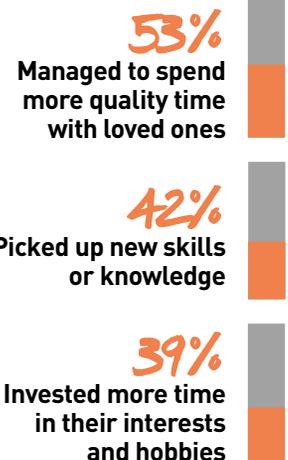


WE ARE MOST WORRIED ABOUT OUR...

- 1 Personal financial stability
- 2 Household financial stability
- 3 The physical health of loved ones
- 4 Overseas travel restrictions
- 5 Mental health

It might have been a tough year, but there are always things to be grateful for. What are three things you can count as blessings?

THREE POSITIVE ACTIONS TAKEN OVER THE PAST YEAR



How do you picture yourself one year from now? Draw a self-portrait. What do you think your sketch says about how you imagine your future to be?

HER WORLD'S
WHAT WOMEN WANT
2022 SURVEY

Over 6,000 women responded to our survey on health and wellness. This series highlights key areas that readers are most interested in.

NOT
JUST
FOR

Women

LOOKING FOR WAYS TO GET ACTIVE? IN THIS SECOND OF OUR FIVE-PART SERIES BASED ON HER WORLD'S WHAT WOMEN WANT 2022 SURVEY, WE SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT ON THREE WOMEN WHO ARE AT THE TOP OF THEIR GAME IN TRADITIONALLY MALE-DOMINATED SPORTS.

Xu Liting is well-known in the local bouldering scene, and has competed both locally and internationally.

Xu Litong

THE 33-YEAR-OLD COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT HAS BEEN ROCK CLIMBING FOR 13 YEARS. SHE CLIMBS COMPETITIVELY AND HAS WON ALL OF THE MAIN BOULDERING COMPETITIONS IN SINGAPORE AT LEAST ONCE. (@ @LITHIUM88)



I was introduced to climbing when I got a job as a programmes manager at a climbing gym while studying for my degree. I got hooked on it pretty quickly because it is different from other sports – it involves an element of problem solving. Every time I go to the gym, I’m faced with various ‘problems’ of varying complexities, so every session is exciting.

I’m not a professional climber, as I don’t get paid to do it, and so I need a full-time job to earn a living. However, I’ve competed both locally and internationally, and have won all of the main bouldering competitions in Singapore at least once. One of my favourite competitions was the 2019 Moonboard Masters, in which anyone across the globe could take part remotely using a standardised set-up. I won the international competition and got sponsored by the company that organised it.

Climbing may be a traditionally male-dominated sport, but that has changed a lot over the past couple of years, at least in Singapore. While I haven’t faced any major discrimination as a female climber, there are times where male climbers make thoughtless remarks, such as ‘she’s only good because she’s so light’. Yes, strength-to-weight ratio counts, but they forget that since women are smaller and shorter, it also means we have to work harder to get through each move.

In my opinion, climbing is one of the most gender-equal sports out there. If we go by the grading system, men and women are not that far apart when it comes to how hard they can climb. From what I’ve observed, a lot of the time, it is the women who hold themselves back – they tend to be easily intimidated and are more self-conscious

about their performance, so they shy away from attempting problems. Even though I compete, I’m not a competitive person, thus one of the things I love about climbing is that it’s you against the problem you’re trying to solve. It is important to keep that in mind, and not give in to the pressure of being scrutinised when you’re on the wall.

One of the things I’ve had to sacrifice for climbing is my social life – my life is pretty much work, climb, sleep, repeat. I don’t feel bad about it though, because I feel fortunate to have something I’m so passionate about. The most rewarding thing about it is seeing the progression I’ve made, and knowing that I achieved something that I couldn’t before. I don’t do other sports outside of climbing because I don’t think I actually have the energy to do so – I spend so much time climbing. However, there are other complementary activities to climbing, including yoga and pilates, which greatly help with flexibility, mobility and core strength. Callisthenics is also a complement to the sport, as it builds strength.

My advice to women looking to get into climbing? Just take the first step! Look for a gym that is friendlier towards beginners, and don’t be afraid to approach people there for guidance. Climbers are generally a very friendly bunch, and we are all very happy to give pointers. Women might be intimidated because it looks like a sport that requires a lot of strength, but it’s really a full-body exercise. You’d be amazed at just how much you can accomplish without being able to do a single pull-up.”



Farhanna Farid engaged a powerlifting coach when she dead-lifted more than the national record during a casual session at the gym.



Farhanna Farid

SHE HAS BEEN POWERLIFTING FOR FIVE YEARS, AND WORKS AS A PHARMACIST AND POWERLIFTING COACH. THE 30-YEAR-OLD HAS BROKEN MULTIPLE ASIAN RECORDS, AND IS THE FIRST SINGAPOREAN TO CLINCH AN OVERALL GOLD MEDAL IN THE OPEN AGE CATEGORY AT THE 2018 CLASSIC POWERLIFTING CHAMPIONSHIPS IN MONGOLIA. (@ @FARHANNAFARIDDD)

I got into powerlifting when I started following my boyfriend to the gym. Back then, I had no sense of my strength or lifting capabilities, so when I dead-lifted more than the national record, I had no idea what my potential could mean. However, it marked the turning point, as my boyfriend then suggested that we engage a powerlifting coach to see how far I could take it.

While powerlifting takes centre stage in my life right now, I wouldn't call myself a professional powerlifter, as I'm not a full-time athlete and I'm not getting paid for it. We do not have a grading system – that is how accessible powerlifting is – and there are no entry requirements to competitions either. Powerlifting has taught me a lot about my own body: its uniqueness, strengths and limitations. It has also given me the discipline to push or hold back when necessary.

I competed in two local competitions within my first year, and for my third competition I represented Singapore at the 2018 Asian Classic Powerlifting Championships in Mongolia. I will never forget the goosebumps and the pride I felt hearing our national anthem after I clinched Singapore's first gold medal in the Open Age Category.

In terms of gender representation, I'd say that when powerlifting in Singapore was in its infancy

a decade ago, we only had a handful of athletes, and there were definitely more males than females. However, in recent times, our team sent 14 athletes to compete at the Singapore Powerlifting Opens, nine of whom were female.

I've never been subjected to discrimination because of my gender and, for the most part, men are usually in awe of what I do and are highly supportive of my passion. If anything, I actually get some form of resistance from women: They question why I do this, and why I 'want to look muscular'. That said, I believe it comes from a place of concern or curiosity.

There are definitely more women gracing the gym floor nowadays, and I think this change is here to stay. We are starting to accept that beauty comes in all shapes and forms, and women are realising how empowering lifting can be, both physically and mentally. The recent overtones of female empowerment have also propelled women to push themselves beyond their boundaries.

My advice to women looking to get into powerlifting? Talk to folks in the sport and ask for advice – slide into my DMs! As with most sports, learn the basics, and master the form and technique first. Also, don't allow yourself to be intimidated by numbers: with the right programming, the strength will come. Lastly, turning up at the gym is a win in itself, so just show up."

Kirstie Gannaway has been boxing for nearly half her life, despite her family's initial resistance to her pursuing the sport.



Kirstie Gannaway

SHE PICKED UP BOXING 16 YEARS AGO AND IS A MARTIAL ARTS INSTRUCTOR. ALSO A PROFESSIONAL BOXER, THE 31-YEAR-OLD HAS WON TWO PROFESSIONAL BOXING FIGHTS. (@KIRSTIEGANNAWAY)

"growing up, I looked up to my older brother, and when he started competing in boxing after my dad signed him up for lessons, I was inspired to do it too. He brought me to the gym and taught me the basics, and I haven't stopped training since.

My family had tried to discourage me from pursuing boxing – and then from fighting professionally – for a mix of reasons, including the risk of injury, and the lack of opportunities in Singapore that would make it hard to make ends meet. It was a big risk on my part to pursue it, but it is my passion and I made the decision to proceed. I became a professional boxer in 2018, and currently train at The Ring Boxing Community. Boxing is a male-dominated sport, but I believe socially constructed gender norms contribute to that.

While there were times when I had to prove myself as a female fighter, those moments only helped me to sharpen my mindset in the sport.

That said, I have been heckled at because of my gender. My worst experience was at a gym in Australia – I had to put up with guys making sexual noises at me while spooning gym equipment and making inappropriate jokes. I left and never went back. I'm particular about only training in places where I'm shown respect, and during those times when I struggled to find the right place, I would just train at home.

There are now more women in boxing than before, and the eagerness of women to break gender stereotypes is also greater than ever! Boxing has become so much more popular as a way to get fit, and it helps that there are now plenty of female role models in combat sports.

My journey in martial arts has allowed me to learn so much about myself and how to become a better person: from learning and applying discipline, respect and self-confidence, to practising focus, mindfulness and calmness under pressure. Also, as women, our bodies are constantly changing due to hormonal fluctuations, so it has taught me to trust my intuition when it comes to training.

My advice to women looking to pick up boxing? Check out the different gyms until you find what feels like the right environment for you. I pay a lot of attention to the people at a gym because they are the ones who create the vibe of the place. It's important to train at a place where you feel safe and comfortable. If you feel intimidated, you can also start by getting a friend or colleague to attend a class with you."

HOW
WOMEN
ARE

tech- ing charge

OF THEIR
HEALTH

IN THIS THIRD OF OUR FIVE-PART SERIES BASED ON HER WORLD'S WHAT WOMEN WANT 2022 SURVEY, WE EXPLORE THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND WOMEN'S HEALTH.



HER WORLD'S
WHAT WOMEN WANT
2022 SURVEY

Over 6,000 women responded to our survey on health and wellness, which was run in collaboration with consumer research and analytics firm Milieu Insight. This series highlights key areas that readers are most interested in.



There's an app for everything these days. Femtech (or female technology) is aimed at improving women's health and wellness through various digital products or services. With technology, you can track menstruation and fertility cycles, or monitor sexual health and menopause.

The women's health market is estimated to reach nearly US\$1.19 trillion (SG\$1.6 trillion) globally by 2027, according to the *Femtech Landscape Report 2021*, co-authored by non-profit Femtech Focus and Coyote Ventures, a venture capital company that invests in women's health and wellness start-ups.

Meanwhile, market research firm Frost and Sullivan predicts the femtech sector will reach a market potential of US\$50 billion (SG\$69 billion) by 2025. In fact, Singapore is building a reputation as a centre for femtech in Asia: In 2021, Singapore hosted more than 24 femtech companies, out of the 41 based in South-east Asia.

"Over the last year, Singapore has started to receive recognition as the 'hub of femtech', most likely due to the fact that we hold half of what is available in the region," says Francesca Geary-Stingl, PR and marketing lead at Fermata Singapore, an Asian femtech ecosystem that provides solutions on marketplace, localisation support and B2B consulting.

And yet, the recent results of *Her World's What Women Want 2022* survey, a collaboration with Milieu Insight that surveyed more than 6,000 women in

Singapore, appeared to indicate that tech-based solutions for women's health haven't yet gained the traction you'd expect in a technologically knowledgeable and well-connected nation. Asked what kinds of femtech products or services they use: 52 per cent of survey respondents don't use femtech at all, 39 per cent use period-related ones, and between 3 and 7 per cent reported using products or services targeting fertility, breastfeeding, pregnancy, sexual wellness and menopause.

Between the promising potential of the femtech industry, and data that seems to point to a less enthusiastic adoption of femtech among women in Singapore so far, what gives?

TIME OF THE MONTH

According to our survey, the most-used category of femtech is period-related products or services. Milieu Insight's own report issued this April on the use of femtech in South-east Asia revealed results in a similar vein: Those who've adopted femtech for period health account for 72 per cent of femtech users in the region.

Emma Lenzer is one such example. The 23-year-old began using Clue, a period and ovulation tracking app, about a year ago, around the time she was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and was looking for a way to stay on top of her health by tracking her irregular cycles. The app can keep track of information such as spotting, energy levels, the presence of pain or cramps, mood and sleep.



“It’s definitely been helpful to be able to visualise my ovulation cycle, and although I am not looking to have children anytime soon, I do worry about the fertility difficulties that come with PCOS,” Emma says. “So I think it’s important, especially in these kinds of cases, to keep an eye on your cycle, in case other anomalies present themselves.”

And within the period-related femtech space, the range of offerings has expanded in recent years to include items such as menstrual cups and discs, and period underwear, made with materials such as medical-grade silicone, and innovative moisture-wicking or liquid-locking fabrics.

With period health being one of the more widely known categories of femtech, Francesca says: “It’s been great to see (that it has) grown in terms of innovation and technology.”

DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS

Beyond period trackers, there exists a wide array of technologies and product types that tackle the same health concerns from various angles.

Take the fertility space for example – not only are there apps and kits that track ovulation cycles based on monitoring basal temperature or measuring hormone levels, there are even physical devices designed to boost the odds of conception, such as the Sperm Guide by Twoplus, a brand of products that cater to fertility health. Launched by Stanford University’s Biodesign Innovation Fellows Prusothman Raja and Benjamin Tee, the silicone insert is designed to “help retain maximum sperm throughout the vaginal tract, so more can reach the egg for fertilisation to take place”.

“One in six couples face infertility globally. Moreover, a lot of subfertility burden is placed on females in many cultures, and I wanted to be able to alleviate the burden on females through setting up Twoplus,” says Benjamin.

In addition to shipping thousands of its first product in Singapore and the UK within nine months of Twoplus’ launch late last year, he notes that the platform has introduced products such as at-home hormone tests, artificial insemination kits, ovulation kits, and supplements such as CoQ10 and folic acid.

“We think there is very strong demand for fertility technologies and services via online channels,” says Benjamin.

WHAT GOOD DOES IT DO?

Accuracy and reliability could vary depending on how femtech is used, and that might influence how secure users feel about their health. Emma’s experience with Clue points to potential for lapses to appear.

“Based on what you log into the calendar, the app is supposed to predict when your next period

and ovulation cycle will begin. However, as I am unfortunately a bit all over the place, I feel like I never get a fully accurate result, or at least I’m never 100 per cent confident in what they tell me. Although it’s very helpful for me to keep track, in terms of prediction, I have my doubts about how efficient it really is – but that just may be my fault.”

Benjamin personally went through the struggles of unexplained infertility with his wife. The couple tried doing basal temperature monitoring for ovulation, but it was somewhat troublesome to do and hard to get accurate readings.

“You had to measure (your temperature) immediately first thing in the morning when you wake up. If you forget to, you





IT CERTAINLY HELPS TO MAKE DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS, BUT ONLY IF THE DATASET IS ROBUST AND SUFFICIENT.

get missing data points,” he explains. “Such incidences may also increase baseline stress levels, which are probably already elevated when trying to conceive for a few months.”

Using femtech as a preliminary guide, in conjunction with advice from medical experts, could be a way to boost health benefits.

“It certainly helps to make data-driven decisions, but only if the dataset is robust and sufficient. I think it helps to give a baseline read of whether your menstrual cycle is regular, and if not, it gives some impetus to perform more thorough checks earlier through a fertility specialist,” Benjamin adds.

Dr Christopher Chong, a urogynaecologist and obstetrician & gynaecologist at Gleneagles Hospital, says

that while it’s beneficial that his patients are educating themselves, empowered and trying femtech on their own – ovulation- and period-tracking products are the most common types of femtech he’s noticed among his patients – it can sometimes interfere with his work. “I would tell patients that if they can get all the answers they need on the Internet, they will not need doctors anymore,” he quips.

“Doctors make the difference as they can examine the patient – this is most crucial. (Femtech) is of some good, as it can give patients an idea, but it’s (not helpful when) patients don’t know enough to fully understand (medical) conditions. Then, they worry unnecessarily, or reject doctors’ advice because they read too much, but without proper understanding.”

He recounts an episode where he spent a long time explaining to a patient and her husband that vaginal hormone insertion was not the same as hormone replacement therapy; she had refused his recommendation of the former, after reading up on the latter and its side effects and complications, and conflating the two treatments.

“The practice of medicine is very different from [using] apps,” Dr Chong explains. “Doctors need to examine the patient, and there can be subtle findings that affect the type and course of treatment. It’s not uncommon that [femtech] can be more of a hindrance than a help!”

STILL A WAY TO GO

Milieu Insight’s April report on the use of femtech in South-east Asia showed that just 23 per cent of women in Singapore are using a femtech product or service.

A possible explanation for the seemingly modest adoption of femtech could be a difference in understanding of what’s even considered femtech in the first place. “The industry does open itself further than solely being software or strictly medical diagnostics – it also includes innovative technology that goes into improving certain products to better a woman’s life,” says Francesca.

On its marketplace platform, femtech available include items like a hands-free massage bra, menstrual cups and period underwear. “I personally would be curious to know whether there would be a change of response from the (*What Women Want 2022* survey) participants and whether they use or have used (such) products,” she adds.

And while femtech aimed at period health, sexual wellness, sexual health and fertility are becoming increasingly popular, the conversation around the full spectrum of femtech products and services could be hampered by the perception that still persists among some that talking about women’s health issues, such as discussing one’s period or fertility, is taboo.

BEYOND PERIOD TRACKERS

Tools that help monitor your menstrual cycle may still be the better known example of femtech for now, but there's a host of products and services that serve various aspects of women's health. Here's a primer.

FERTILITY

Twoplus (twoplusfertility.com): Besides retailing fertility-enhancing products, the platform offers services such as its Get Pregnant Programme, a six-month personalised fertility coaching programme.

Simone (meetsimone.com): The remote screening and monitoring platform for PCOS supports users in their nutrition, physical activity and mental health via its app, peer support group meetings, and quarterly hormone testing and monitoring.

PREGNANCY

Biorithm (bio-rithm.com): The start-up spun off from Nanyang Technological University offers the Femom foetal monitoring solution, which includes a foetal monitor, mobile app and physician dashboard to improve perinatal outcomes.

SEXUAL WELLNESS

Maison Mika (maisonmika.com.sg): The intimate lifestyle boutique retails products ranging from a spectrum of sex toys to erotic accessories for bondage and kegel balls, alongside a blog that covers issues related to romance, relationships and sex.

DellaHQ (thedellahq.com):

The diverse content platform discusses all things related to sexual wellness, from interviews with female founders on the femtech industry to reviews of vibrators.

MENOPAUSE

Elocare (elo.care): Among its solutions for chronic and ageing care, it offers a mobile app and the Elo wearable, which is personalised to a user's health profile and monitors body data such as heart rate and hot flashes.

SEXUAL HEALTH

Dear Doc (dear-doc.com): Described as a one-stop healthcare solution for women, it provides birth control, sexual health consultation with doctors, and STI test services, all done remotely.

Siena (sienahealth.com):

Starting with a lifestyle and medical history evaluation, followed by a teleconsult with a doctor, users can receive birth control pills or patches, emergency contraception, and treatments targeting acne, weight loss and herpes delivered to their home.

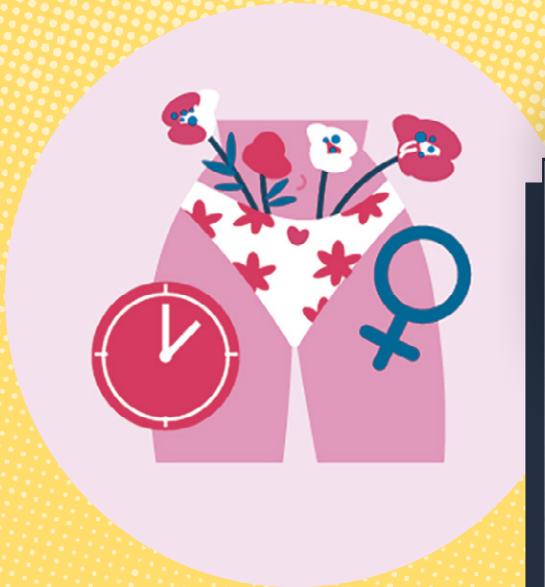
"What femtech companies are trying to do is not only sell a product or a service; they are primarily trying to bridge the knowledge gap and create a safe space for the community to lean into during their time of need – and also for those who are looking to be allies or supporters," says Francesca.

In spite of how femtech has yet to attain maximum (ahem) penetration, it could serve as a good start to opening up the conversation to all the ways that technology can support women in achieving their health goals.

"I feel that we know so little about women's reproductive, sexual or overall health in general – it hasn't been talked about enough. It only started gaining momentum over the past few years, especially through social media, which I think is extremely important. I've learnt so much about it since," says Emma.

"I think that femtech products and services are definitely going to be a part of my future, especially as I get older. I will always look for ways to learn more about my health, and also how to take better care of it."

Francesca agrees: "Women's health has always been under-represented and under-researched – femtech presents itself as an opportunity and a solution for women to arm themselves with knowledge about their bodies. The more people that use femtech, the more data points can be collected to determine what other challenges or solutions are needed to overcome (knowledge gaps)."



LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR

mental health

IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYONE AND THEIR MOTHER IS TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH THESE DAYS - BUT FOR MANY OF US, VOCALISING OUR STRUGGLES REMAINS A CHALLENGE. WHY CAN'T WE JUST OPEN UP?

Many local celebrities have, in recent years, opened up about their mental health struggles publicly. Among them are actresses Jeanette Aw and Michelle Chong, who have shared their experiences battling depression, as well as personalities like Munah Bagharib and Hanli Hoefer, who have discussed their anxiety-related struggles on social media. Even business leaders such as Piyush Gupta, CEO of DBS Group, and Chng Kai Fong, former managing director of the Economic Development Board, have opened up about their mental issues.

But when we were compiling the *Her World Health and Wellness Report 2022* - where we surveyed over 6,000 women in Singapore - 51 per cent of respondents said that they would rather solve their own problems before asking for help. And as highlighted by an October 2020 article by *The Straits Times*, a survey by communications consultancy Sandpiper Communications found that most young people are still uncomfortable discussing their mental health, despite increased stress from the Covid-19 pandemic.

If public figures among us have normalised talking about their mental health, why are most of us still uncomfortable discussing these issues?

HER WORLD'S WHAT WOMEN WANT 2022 SURVEY

Over 6,000 women responded to our survey on health and wellness, which was run in collaboration with consumer research and analytics firm Milieu Insight. This series highlights key areas that readers are most interested in.

STIGMAS ARE STILL PREVALENT

As it turns out, while an increasing number of people are open to sharing their experiences, the stigmas attached to mental health conditions are still prevalent, and the public perception of mental health issues still has a long way to go.

“Although there is more awareness about these conditions, many people still do not possess a good understanding of them. For example, there is uncertainty on how depression or anxiety actually looks like, or the many forms they can take,” says Dr Annabelle Chow, a clinical psychologist at Annabelle Psychology. She adds that despite the distinct differences between various disorders, they are often categorised as a whole, and that those with mental health issues are commonly portrayed in the media as “dangerous or unhinged”. While both are considered as mood disorders, depression is typically associated with a persistent feeling of sadness, while anxiety is characterised by fear and worry.

“As such, people still fear the judgement of others, like being viewed as ‘less’. They might also feel that it is useless to talk about their issues as it does not make them go away.”

Her sentiments are echoed by Pearlene Lim, a senior clinical psychologist at Promises Healthcare. “In my experience, stigmas are one of the biggest reasons why many people refrain from speaking openly about their mental health struggles. I personally see this more in adults than in young people, as adults

typically have ‘more to lose’, like their relationships or careers,” she says.

Jean* (not her real name), 32, is one such example. The marketing manager – who has been at her job for the past three years and on antidepressants for the past four years – shares that she has asked her supervisor for mental health days, but that “more often than not, they are not approved”. She lets on that she does not tell her colleagues about these requests as she does not want them to view her “in a less favourable light”.

While not all workplaces are supportive of mental health issues, the good news is that a growing number of companies is starting to recognise the value of catering to the needs of their employees.

“One of my managers used to say, ‘People first, and profits will follow.’ Organisations that prioritise employee well-being, and have diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in place, are likely to find that these policies are lower-cost solutions that could have significant ROI in the long term,” says Eugenia Ng, director at recruitment firm Michael Page Singapore. In fact, a recent US-based study by investment and insurance company The Hartford found that 71 per cent of employees claimed that deteriorating mental health had an adverse effect on the company’s financials.

LACK OF AWARENESS

If the desire to deal with one’s mental health privately does not stem from discomfort, then it might simply be that we are not aware that our mental health is on the decline.

WATCH OUT FOR THESE COMMON SYMPTOMS

There is no litmus test that can let someone know if they are struggling with their mental health or if it is the result of a physical illness. A medical practitioner will be best placed to make a diagnosis. We asked Voon Yen Sing, senior assistant director of Clinical Services at the Singapore Association for Mental Health for some common symptoms that may be indicators.

- Inability or reduction in ability to carry out daily activities or handle daily challenges and stress
- Changes in emotion, such as feeling excessively sad, anxious, guilty, angry or fearful
- Confused thinking or difficulties in concentrating
- Changes in social interaction, like avoiding friends and social activities, or exhibiting inappropriate behaviours like talking excessively
- Changes in sleeping habits or having low energy

“We generally don’t know what we don’t know, and if symptoms are mild and/or infrequently experienced, it may be easy to dismiss them as something else. Many mental health disorders often co-occur or have overlapping symptoms with other illnesses, whether physical or mental. This can make it hard to recognise that we are suffering from mental health issues,” says Pearlene.

She explains that in her experience, most people only realise that there is an issue to be addressed when they experience significant functional impairment, such as being unable to work or perform activities of daily living.

“For example, in the case of dysthymia [a mild but long-term form of depression], patients may think that feeling ‘this way’ is normal as they are less functionally impaired compared to someone with major depressive disorder.”

She adds that they were usually raised in a home with a lot of family conflict, which makes them perceive their moods as normal.

“They typically can function well and, only when comparing situations when talking to friends, realise that their emotional responses to stressors are significantly worse. It is when they are encouraged to see professionals that they realise they have a mental health issue.”

SEEK HELP IF YOU NEED IT

Family and friends are an invaluable source of support, but trained professionals can provide a different, non-biased perspective.

“Psychologists are trained to identify and change certain thought and behavioural patterns that contribute to a person’s distress. We also equip them with skills to not only cope with the challenges they might face, but also to grow and thrive, improving their overall quality of life,” says Dr Chow.

One can also consider online therapy. Singapore-based telehealth companies that offer this service include Safe Space, Whitecoat and Lavica.

“Online telehealth sessions are becoming commonplace and studies have shown that, in many circumstances, they

can be an effective alternative to in-person therapy. That said, it is by no means a complete substitute for in-person therapy, so it is important to speak to your psychologist about what is best for you.”

The Government is also playing its part in raising support and awareness for mental health. In April 2022, the #BetterTogether initiative was launched to champion mental health literacy, support and destigmatisation, which will entail “surveying perspectives and collecting feedback” and “[conducting] plenary sessions and dialogues on mental health and well-being”. The official statement goes on to add that the eventual goal is to “consolidate ground concerns and proposals for legislative and policy changes in this regard”.

This is on top of the “Beyond the Label” campaign that was launched by the National Council of Social Service in 2018 to address stigmas faced

by persons with mental health conditions. One of its initiatives was the launch of the Mindline.sg portal, a one-stop website with resources to help people cope with stress and improve their well-being.

As for how we as a society can encourage both ourselves and those around us to be comfortable talking about our mental health issues, it can start with a few simple steps.

“Firstly, we can reframe how we view mental health and mental illness. While these terms are often interchangeably used, they are not the same thing. A person can experience poor mental health and not be diagnosed with a mental illness. Likewise, a person diagnosed with a mental illness can experience periods of physical, mental and social well-being,” says Voon Yen Sing, senior assistant director of Clinical Services at the Singapore Association for Mental Health.

She adds that we can also cultivate an understanding that we all have to care for our mental health, just as we do our physical health, and be more aware of our approach towards mental health and mental illness.

“Choose to be informed about the facts – be open to attending awareness-raising events or check out credible sources to demystify commonly held stereotypes. And then, examine your own judgemental thinking or unconscious biases.

“Finally, choose your words carefully as they can affect the attitudes of others, and listen actively to people’s perspectives without giving them advice prematurely,” she advises.

This is the final instalment of Her World’s What Women Want series.



HOW TO HELP AND LEND SUPPORT

Pearlene Lim, a senior clinical psychologist at Promises Healthcare, suggests some ways you can go about being a shoulder to lean on.

Recognise the signs

If there's been a significant change in their behaviour and ability to function, talk to them to find out more and encourage them to seek professional help if needed.

Know the resources available

Take note of the various helplines they can reach out to and direct them to reputable online resources so they can find out more about their condition. However, it's important that they do not self-diagnose.

Listen actively and accompany them to see a professional if necessary

Try to empathise – it can be scary for them to be vulnerable when talking about their struggles.

3 TIPS FOR REGULATING YOUR MOOD

Dr Annabelle Chow, a clinical psychologist at Annabelle Psychology, explains that these are some simple things we can do.

1 Schedule worry time

It is natural to worry when you have a seemingly impossible workload, but by scheduling a specific time to worry and reflect on the tasks on hand, it allows you to create space to focus on those that are of immediate importance.

2 Practise STOP

Stop whatever you are doing, and take a short, mindfulness break: Focus on your breath, how the air feels on your nostrils and how your body moves as you breathe. Observe the sensations in your body, thoughts you are having and emotions you are feeling. Then, proceed with what needs to be done.

3 Have self-compassion

When the voice of your inner critic becomes too loud, it can bring excessive negativity into your life. Acknowledge this voice, recognise what is relevant and what is not, and learn how to discern which feelings and thoughts will be beneficial in the long-run, and which ones to discard.

