

Healthy and Fit Soldiers

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Healthy and fit soldiers are the most valuable asset for any countries as well as for Malaysian Armed Forces. Soldiers are trained to carry out tasks in a wide range of situations, terrains and climates. They are required to maintain high levels of fitness during deployments to ensure they are able to carry their personal gear, military equipment and conduct routine operations. Overall military performance is based on a combination of individual strengths that create a complex of productivity, both mentally and physically, so that soldiers who are in peak physical condition can contribute more to their teams than members who are in poor physical condition. This makes major physical and mental demands on individual soldiers. Soldiers must achieve, and maintain, a state of physical and mental health and fitness which will enable them to carry out their duties in war or peace whenever needed with drive, determination and efficiency. In military, one of the principal cause of soldiers' wastage during wars are due to individual' sickness, not directly from wounds received in battle or other battle casualties. Therefore, it is very important for a soldier to keep healthy and maintain their physical fitness in preparing themselves for unexpected events in the future.

Every soldier must aware that physical fitness and a healthy body are the keystone of combat readiness. According to World Health Organisation (WHO), health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Military experts define fitness as the ability to effectively function in training, physical work and other activities whilst still having enough energy reserves to deal with arising emergencies. Meanwhile, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention defined physically fit as "the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigour and alertness, without undue fatigue and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and to meet unforeseen emergencies" (CDC, 2015). Combat operations require high levels of cardiovascular and muscular endurance. Every soldier can be subjected to excruciatingly long foot marches, hand-to-hand combat and navigation of rough terrain in war zones. Maintaining a high level of physical fitness helps the soldiers to perform at the military's highest standards throughout their careers. Soldiers who are physically fit can endure tough living conditions, hard work and stressful situations more readily than those who are not.

It is essential for soldiers to have a high level of physical fitness in order to perform at the optimum level. Physical exercise keeps soldiers in most top condition so they are always ready for any mission. Physical fitness includes a number of components consisting of cardiorespiratory endurance, skeletal muscle endurance, skeletal muscle

strength, skeletal muscle power, flexibility, balance, speed of movement, reaction time, and body composition. Strong muscles and high levels of cardiovascular fitness can help prevent injuries. Healthy muscles are less prone to injury, less likely to tear and less likely to give in to stress than unhealthy, underdeveloped muscles. Soldiers who are in shape are less likely to become winded, suffer from cramps and debilitating conditions than their less-fit counterparts, which is particularly helpful during deployment operations and during routine physical fitness testing.

Non-communicable diseases or also known as life style diseases have become a global challenge. The prevalence of overweight and obesity is a significant public health problem, affecting increasing numbers of Malaysian adults. In 2016, Malaysia is declared as the most obese country in Asia with an obesity rate of more than 45.3% (BMI more than 25), according to British Medical Journal, The Lancet. The military personnel also is not immune to this trend, directly impacting the health and combat readiness of the soldiers. Excessive body fat connotes a lack of personal discipline among soldiers and may indicate a poor state of health, physical fitness, or stamina. Obesity is not only affecting our military personnel, but it also a health threat for other countries. For examples, in United States, there was a threefold increase in the annual number of active-duty personnel diagnosed as overweight or obese from 1998 to 2010 (Marian et al., 2013). In the Australian Army, it was documented that 14% of males and 7% of females were classed as obese, while 49% of males and 30% of females were overweight (Leslie, 2011). Therefore, Malaysian Armed Forces Health Services (MAFHS) minimizes military personnel losses due to diseases related to obesity, unhealthy diet and life styles, chronic illnesses and physical injuries by using standardized physical training programs to keep all soldiers in good overall health.

MAFHS has adopted various health programs that integrates both preventive as well as curative measures to ensure health of all soldiers. The preventive programs focusing on healthy diets, physical exercise and healthy life styles are implemented for Malaysian Armed Forces personnel that emphasis on fitness and health. The programs include routine medical check-ups for all soldiers (PULHEEMS), Komuniti Sihat Perkasa Negara-Perwira (KOSPEN-Perwira), Reconditioning and Rehabilitation (R&R) program and Airforce Weight Control programs which emphasize on prevention of NCD diseases. At operational level, there was program developed to ensure fitness of all soldiers such as Soldiers Fitness Test (UKA) and Military Obstacle Tests.

The tests are designed to test the muscular strength, endurance, and cardiovascular respiratory fitness of all soldiers. Overall, the aim of all these programs are to prevent obesity, to maintain health and to develop fitness of military personnel. The programs also teach the soldiers on a comprehensive approach leads to permanent change from unhealthy life styles and to maintain health at all levels so they can carry out their military missions.

In conclusion, a proper body weight and physical fitness of a soldier supports good health, appropriate military and physical appearance as well as combat readiness.

The ultimate goals of a soldiers' health is to promote and maintain the highest degree of physical; mental and social well-being of soldiers; to prevent decline in health caused by their working conditions; to protect soldiers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; and to place and maintain soldiers in an occupational environment adapted to their physiological and psychological capabilities. Let the quote of "better to sweat in peace rather than bleed in war" shall be kept tight in the hearts of all soldiers.