

FITNESS & WELL-BEING



After his health scare, Feisal Alibhai founded Qineticare in Hong Kong in 2013, offering bespoke health and wellness services. Photo: Nora Tam

Better in balance

Cancer survivor Feisal Alibhai cheated death 12 years ago. This is how he has changed his life

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On Sundays, Feisal Alibhai and his two boys have an after-dinner meeting of a kind not seen in many other Hong Kong households.

"We sit down and decide the meals for every day, from Monday to Sunday, breakfast, lunch, dinner. On a full stomach. That makes them learn to be proactive and not reactive, and they get to see a full balance, the full view of what they're eating," Alibhai says. "At the age of seven and nine, they were already learning to control what goes in their mouths, and to balance."

It is never too early to take charge of your health and all the elements that may affect it, including how and what we eat, he says – and he speaks from experience.

In September 2004, the then-35-year-old high-flying family business titan got a harsh reality check: a stage-three lung cancer diagnosis. Eleven months on, and after 20 rounds of gruelling chemotherapy and three operations to remove 10 tumours, he began his recovery and personal transformation. Now it is his mission to help others take charge of their health, too.

I want you to make better choices based on my life's lesson

FEISAL ALIBHAI, CEO, QINETICARE

"I want you to learn from idiots like me," he told attendees of the Khoja Business Leaders' Summit, in Davos, Switzerland, in September 2017. "I want you to make better choices based on my life's lesson and not have to pay the school fees."

Far from being an idiot, the Democratic Republic of Congo-born Alibhai, a graduate of The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, had been heading up a multimillion-dollar, fast-moving consumer goods business with 10,000 employees in 15 countries – most of them war-torn, third-world places "where nobody wants to go".

He had moved to Hong Kong from New York in 1992 to set up a buying office, and was spending about half his time on the road. Illness pushed him in a new direction.

Alibhai had ready access to all the resources he needed to recover. In the decade that followed, many relatives and associates reached out for his help when they, too, had an unexpected health crisis. Spending time in their hospital rooms, and seeking out the best available care for them, he learned that, no matter how well-off or well-educated,

"nobody had a structure in place to protect, manage and improve their health".

He established Qineticare in Hong Kong in 2013 to offer such a structure. Its bespoke services include a consolidation of clients' family medical histories, and assessments of their health status to understand their medical predisposition to disease, and to build a medical team for them to call on at any time, from any place.

But medicine is only one part of the health equation. After his brush with death, Alibhai wanted to understand how it happened, especially to him. "I used to do [medical] check-ups every year in January, a full screening," he says. He had home-cooked meals, and rarely ate out. "I would work out every day. I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't drink coffee. I don't drink tea. I don't do recreational funny things, either."

When the doctors shrugged their shoulders, he turned to yoga masters, intuitive healers, and a host of world-class experts for answers. "They started to explain the imbalance of life," Alibhai says, and he began to learn about finding balance.

A second pillar of the business, what Alibhai calls "beyond medical", is all about balance. It is the area that most excites him, and he freely shares what he has learned: that addressing five fundamental elements that affect our health can transform our lives.

Qineticare now taps an army of coaches, among them an Ayurvedic (traditional Indian medicine) master, a mind trainer, a parenting coach (former television show host Oprah Winfrey's favourite, New York-based clinical psychologist Dr Shefali Tsabary), a sleep coach, integrative medicine doctors, and a physical trainer.

From them, Alibhai has learned the five questions we must ask ourselves: "How am I eating? How am I moving? How am I sleeping? How am I thinking? How am I feeling?"

Channelling these for optimum health and well-being, he achieved a full recovery. Finding the right balance in each area will help you gain control of your life by allowing you to respond, rather than react, to situations.

ON EATING

Know how you feel before you have your meal. At the end of your meal, you should feel the same, but no longer be hungry. You should not feel full or heavy. You should never allow yourself to go to a state of hunger, because then you are reactive.

Are you eating in a way that your energy is balanced throughout the day, or do you have highs and lows? Imagine the impact those imbalances have on the quality of your decision making. Tweak what you eat to find what works for you.

What is the "return on ingestion"? Eat with the end in mind.

Eat at the same times each day, so that your body does not need to go into preservation mode.



From top: a breakfast of spinach, arugula, avocado, seeds and sprouts; daily meditation reduces stress and helps you remain centred; daily exercise must be non-negotiable. Photos: Alamy



Alibhai's typical meal plan:

For breakfast, a vegetable smoothie with cucumber, spinach or kale, a whole avocado, lemon or lime, rock salt and a bit of basil. A snack of 10 almonds and 10 walnuts between breakfast and lunch. For lunch, a salad with lettuce, a nut, a vegetable, a fruit and a dressing. An afternoon snack of plain chocolate, 85 per cent cocoa, 10 per cent sugar. For dinner, a cooked meal with either long-grain brown rice, quinoa or pasta, mainly vegetarian.

ON MOVING

Are you being physically active consistently, at least five times throughout the week? And are you scheduling it in a way in which it is non-negotiable? For me, it has got to be in the morning. If I schedule it at the end of the day, then I have an option of being tired and cancelling. But if it is in the morning, I am full of energy. Once you make it non-negotiable, it is a go.

Alibhai's workout plan: I stretch every morning. I alternate between yoga, hatha yoga,

breathing exercises and cardio training, every other day.

ON SLEEP

Are you getting the rest and recovery you need? Having seven to 7½ hours allows for a full five sleep cycles. The value of the exercise and nutrition will be compromised without sufficient sleep. Sleep consistently at the same time so that your body knows when it is time to sleep, and when it is time to wake up, without an alarm.

ON THINKING

Are you able to be fully present, focused on the people or task at hand? How much outside thought is actually going on while you are with your children, spouse or loved ones, with people that matter?

If you are not able to give them your full attention, the answer could be meditation, or mind training. Some people will say they do not have the time, know where to go, or how to begin. There are many inexpensive multi-day retreats in Hong Kong run by charities. You give what you can. Meditation reduces stress and helps a person to be centred, to step out of a situation and not react emotionally.

The simple act of writing down the thoughts that keep spinning through your mind also helps. Once you write it down, you stop having the same thought. You can do it at the start or end of the day, or both.

Alibhai's daily mind training: I start my day with meditation. I end my day with meditation. How I start and how I end determines my day, determines my sleep. The state I am in when I start my day and end my day will determine my experience.

ON FEELING

Do you have a positive outlook? What is the state of your emotional being throughout the day?

More importantly, do you feel connected to other people? Former US surgeon general Vivek Murthy says the opposite of health is isolation. Science tells us loneliness puts our body in a chronic stress state, and is associated with a shortened lifespan. We go to work with dozens of other people around us, but most of us stare at screens, exchange text messages, but do not open up to others.

Alibhai's experience: While running a business with thousands of employees, he was not communicating his thoughts and feelings to anyone. "I was alone," he says, and when "you have nobody to talk to, you are isolated. That emotional disconnect is what hurts you." Meditation helped him to switch off and be present.

"I was never 'off'. In one-third of the photos with me with my kids, I am on the phone. It is a sad reality. Was I physically there? Yes. Was I mentally there? No. Did I even understand the meaning of presence? No.

HEALTH

Protect your child from developing food allergies

Medical experts recommend a wide and varied diet for pregnant and breastfeeding women

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When she was pregnant, mother-of-two Jasmine Smith made sure she enjoyed a varied diet. The 34-year-old founder and designer of Raven + Rose, a lingerie label in Hong Kong, ate a huge array of foods so her children would be exposed to them from the get-go. The only things she avoided were raw fish, shellfish and some cheeses, because of their potential to cause food poisoning.

Her doctors never advised her to stay away from particular foods, including allergenic ones such as peanuts and eggs.

"In the past, pregnant and nursing women were told to avoid allergy-provoking foods like tree nuts, peanuts, soy, fish, shellfish, milk and eggs, so as to prevent their babies from developing allergies to these foods later on," says Karen Chong, a dietitian at Matilda International Hospital. "But that is no longer the case. Now, mums-to-be and new mums are generally advised to eat a variety of foods while they are pregnant and breastfeeding."

New research out of Boston Children's Hospital seems to support recent allergy-prevention guidelines for pregnant women. The study, which was published in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine* in November, says eating allergenic foods during pregnancy can, in fact, protect your child from developing food allergies, especially if you later breastfeed the child.

In the study, pregnant mice that consumed peanuts and eggs passed on protective antibodies to their offspring through nursing. These antibodies caused the newborn mice to produce allergen-specific regulatory T immune cells, which enabled them to tolerate the allergenic foods.

Interestingly, avoiding allergenic foods while pregnant or breastfeeding is no guarantee that your child will not develop a food allergy.

"Studies have not shown a correlation between eating certain foods during pregnancy and the subsequent development of food allergies," says Dr Adrian Wu Young Yuen, a registered specialist in allergy and immunology at the Centre for Allergy and Asthma Care in Hong Kong's Central District.

"Likewise, avoidance of these foods during pregnancy has not been shown to reduce the risk of sensitisation to these foods."

However, it is important to note that exposure to allergens through the skin may be a risk factor for developing food allergies, says Dr Michael Pistiner, director of food allergy advocacy, education and prevention at the Food Allergy Centre at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, in the United States. This is why you should not apply food to your baby's skin. And if you handle food, Pistiner advises you to wash your hands thoroughly when you are done, especially if you are going to be touching your baby after, and if your baby is not yet eating those foods.

How can your baby develop an allergy via skin exposure to allergens? Wu offers this simple explanation: "Allergies are genetically determined. Studies have

mapped the tendencies to genes that are important in maintaining skin barrier function. Poor skin barrier function allows allergens to penetrate easily, and immune cells under the skin barrier, when exposed to allergens, can lead to sensitisation of the immune system to these allergens. This is why eczema sufferers are more likely to have allergies."

According to Wu, studies have shown that the risk of peanut allergy in high-risk infants directly correlates with the level of peanut allergens in household dust in the infants' environment. He adds that the widespread use of skin-care products containing food ingredients such as nut oils, oats and hydrolysed wheat protein is also likely to have contributed to the increase in food allergies in recent years.



Photo: Shutterstock

Breastfeed the baby for at least six months, if possible

DR ADRIAN WU

In addition to consuming a varied but nutritious diet, if you want to minimise your newborn's risk of developing food allergies, Wu says to breastfeed the baby for at least six months, if possible.

Once your baby is able to eat solid foods – usually between four and six months of age – you should make it a point to feed him or her allergenic foods. "Studies demonstrate that the early introduction of foods thought to be allergenic may be protective," says Pistiner. "Data no longer supports delaying the introduction of allergenic foods."

Smith, who was born in New Zealand, breastfed her oldest child – a girl who is now three years old – for six months. She is now breastfeeding her eight-month-old son and plans to breastfeed him until he is one. She says that, even now, she enjoys a variety of foods, including fish, egg whites, nuts and dairy in the form of natural yogurt. She prepares healthy meals herself, and avoids adding sugar, salt and oil.

"Cooking my own meals gives me more control over what I put into my body, and therefore what my children are exposed to through breastfeeding," she says.



Nursing mother Jasmine Smith and dietitian Karen Chong from Matilda International Hospital.

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