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**KUALA LUMPUR:** Osteoarthritis (OA), a common cause of disability among the elderly, remains a major public health concern worldwide. It is the most common type of arthritis affecting the cartilage of a joint, that is caused by injury or deterioration over the years.

The disease, which causes pain, disability and loss of motor function, usually affects the hands, hips and knees when the cartilage that cushions the ends of the bones wear off.

Worldwide, about 500 million people (7%) suffer from OA. In Malaysia, a 2019 study on adults aged 55 and above in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya showed that 30.8% of respondents had OA affecting the knees.

At a recent webinar titled "Osteoarthritis Care and Obesity Comorbidities - Weight Loss Solutions for Southeast Asia", Subang Jaya Medical Centre consultant rheumatologist Dr Yeap Swan Sim said age is one of the strongest predictors (risk factors) of OA.

"This has been supported by recent figures published for 2021, which found that just below 10% of men and 14% of women aged 50 to 69 have symptomatic hip and knee OA.

"But in the over-70 age group, it is 18% of men and 25% of women," she said during the online forum organised by the Centre for Transformative Nutrition and Health, International Medical University Malaysia.

Yeap, who is also vice-president of the Malaysian Osteoporosis Society, said OA would become more prevalent with an ageing and increasingly obese population.

According to the Statistics Department, the country is expected to become an ageing nation by 2030. An ageing population is defined as one in which those aged 65 and above make up at least 15% of the total population.

"Research has shown that 50% of knee OA in the United States could have been avoided if there was no obesity in the population. In

China, where the obesity rate is lower, OA accounted for only 8%.

"Using a body mass index (BMI) of above 27.4 to define obesity, Malaysia has the highest rate of obesity among Asian countries. In a study done in 2019, 15.6% of our population were obese," Yeap said, adding that those who are obese experience more severe joint degeneration and a greater proportion requires hip, knee or joint replacement.

Another panelist, professor of Research at Parker Institute, Frederiksberg Hospital of Copenhagen, Prof Henning Bliddal, quoted a study in the US which showed a 15% increase in risk of knee OA for each unit of BMI above 27.

Data also shows that the risk of hand OA almost doubles with a BMI above 30.

Henning said the best prevention is losing weight, and knee replacement surgery is only recommended as a last resort, where there is a severe drop in quality of life. - Bernama