

# They're 100 and full of life

## Super seniors defy expectations at S'pore's active ageing centres

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At the age of 105, Madam Lee Yim Leng's daily schedule is more packed than most might expect.

Accompanied by her helper, she attends wellness talks, plays bingo, paints and practices seated taij in her wheelchair at the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre (Care) (Wisma Geylang Sersa) in Haig Road, where she has shown up almost every day since August 2025.

"I exercise and learn Mandarin from the others at the centre," said Madam Lee, who is a little hard of hearing.

She is among a small but growing group of centenarians in Singapore, which in 2026 crossed the super-aged threshold – when 21 per cent or more of the population are aged 65 and older.

There were around 1,500 residents aged 100 and over in Singapore in 2025, up from 1,200 in 2015.

### MORE JOINING ACTIVE AGEING CENTRES

Madam Lee also joins an increasing number of "oldest seniors" who are trying to keep active as they age.

Across NTUC Health's 26 active ageing centres (AACs) islandwide, the number of seniors aged 90 and above more than doubled in just a year, from just over 200 in 2024 to more than 450 in 2025.

Dr Lily Yeo, head of NTUC Health Active Ageing Centres, said this is a clear sign that the oldest seniors are feeling more confident about stepping out of their homes and staying active.

"Beyond the increase in numbers, we are also encouraged to see many of these seniors returning regularly and taking part in multiple programmes by our AACs, reflecting their interest to stay active, socially connected, and engaged in the community," she said.

Among the 22,000 elders it serves, St Luke's ElderCare has more than 10,300 active ageing members. More than 300 are aged 90 and above, including 14 centenarians.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said in May 2025 that more seniors are expected to be staying alone – 122,000 in 2030, up from 76,000 in 2023 – with many of them needing befriending and social support.

He added that with expansion and improvement efforts at AACs, more seniors are participating in their activities, with numbers increasing from close to 80,000 to 100,000 over the past year.

There are over 220 AACs islandwide, supported by the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and run by community partners. Care at the centres focuses on an individual's needs and abilities, rather than age. The growing range of activities also contributes to the uptick in participation.

AACs are seeing seniors in their 80s and 90s take part in activities that range from K-pop dance workouts and martial arts-inspired classes to e-sports such as Counter-Strike, said AIC's assistant chief executive officer Chern Siang Jye.

Higher-intensity options such as Zumba, group fitness classes and dance sessions are increasingly popular, even among older participants, he said.

At NTUC Health's "Let's Steel Combat" sessions, which blend martial arts movements, self-defence techniques and strength training, seniors in their 90s can be seen working up a sweat.

For those who prefer lower-impact activities, AACs also offer adapted options such as seated yoga, floor curling, floorball and volleyball. Cognitive and social programmes range from noodle-making workshops to interest-based learning sessions and even podcasting, with some seniors recording messages to send to their grandchildren.

Madam Maana Unwari, 99, does seated exercises and attends events at St Luke's ElderCare Active Ageing Centre (Care) @ Changkat, accompanied by her helper.

Her daughter, Madam Masbah Chuni, 66, said being active and socially engaged is her mother's secret to staying healthy and happy.

Efforts to persuade seniors to participate go beyond the walls of the AACs, said Dr Yeo.

Getting seniors out of the house is often the biggest hurdle, so her teams conduct home visits and sometimes accompany them to and from centres. They also focus on building trust by celebrating birthdays, doing regular check-ins and staying in touch with less mobile seniors.

St Luke's ElderCare staff similarly knock on doors and reach out to the older folk at community and grassroots events, as well as coffee shops, exercise corners, void decks and markets.

Dr Andrea Tan, a physician at Hua Mei Clinic at ComSA Whampoa under Tsao Foundation, said many seniors aged 90 and above have difficulty leaving home on their own due to mobility or cognitive limitations, or get tired easily. They also experience grief, loneliness and loss of autonomy. Home visits, personalised exercise and engagement initiatives ensure seniors remain connected and supported.

These efforts come as eight in 10 older adults here prefer to age in their current homes, as opposed to nursing homes or other residential care facilities, a study by the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing at Singapore Management University found.

Dr Kelvin Tan, head of the applied ageing studies programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, noted that as each cohort of seniors outlives the previous in li-



Madam Lee Yim Leng, 105, exercising her legs at a fitness corner near NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre (Wisma Geylang Sersa). She joins an increasing number of "oldest seniors" who are trying to keep active as they age. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM



Madam Maana Unwari (left), 99, with her daughter Masbah Chuni, 66, who said being active and socially engaged is her mother's secret to staying healthy and happy. ST PHOTO: CHENG JUN LIANG



Madam Sharada Chellam (left), 101, is always accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Ms Uma Chellam, 64, when she visits NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre (Bukit Merah) twice a week. ST PHOTO: GRU 107

### ACTIVE AND ENGAGED

Beyond the increase in numbers, we are also encouraged to see many of these seniors returning regularly and taking part in multiple programmes by our AACs (active ageing centres), reflecting their interest to stay active, socially connected, and engaged in the community.



DR LILY YEO, head of NTUC Health Active Ageing Centres, on how it is a clear sign that the oldest seniors are feeling more confident about stepping out of their homes and staying active.

### HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

The new cohort of seniors are also more educated, connected and digitally savvy, with higher expectations for higher quality of living. The AACs will have to level up to meet the higher needs of new seniors for them to find hospitality and relevance.



DR KELVIN TAN, head of the applied ageing studies programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, noting that as each cohort of seniors outlives the previous in lifespan, there is a need to help them improve their healthspan too.

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"The new cohort of seniors are also more educated, connected and digitally savvy, with higher expectations for higher quality of living," he added. "The AACs will have to level up to meet the higher needs of new seniors for them to find hospitality and relevance."

Madam Sharada Chellam, 101, is among this group.

The retired teacher visits NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre (Bukit Merah) twice a week. Whether it is acrylic painting, exercises or celebrations, she is always accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Ms Uma Chellam, 64.

Madam Chellam also reads widely, plays the dilruba – a bowed musical instrument – and uses the computer regularly, after attending a course to learn basic skills when she was 76.

While she makes friends on social media platforms, she also looks forward to engaging with the staff and other seniors at the centre.

Asked for the secret to her longevity, she said: "Be happy, and spread your happiness to others."

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