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MICA (P) 026/03/2010 SINGAPORE, WEEKEND OF FRIDAY, APRIL 23, 2010

## Sweet surrender

Diabetes lurks menacingly for Indians,  
especially those with a sweet tooth

**MALAVIKA NATARAJ**

**D**ESPITE a strong family history of diabetes, which put her at risk of getting the disease, Mrs Chitra Varaprasad enjoyed a normal life without any hint of medical problems. However, when the senior lecturer at a prominent Singapore university became pregnant with her first child at the age of 33, she was diagnosed with gestational diabetes, where her blood glucose levels spiked without warning.

It disappeared after she gave birth to her daughter, and she became com-

placent again. Sixteen years later, the disease reared its ugly head again when she was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. Now, having lived with diabetes for a decade, she has made drastic changes to her lifestyle and eating habits.

"Until one gets it, one does not fully know the seriousness of the disease," says Mrs Varaprasad, a Singaporean.

She is part of the statistics tabulated by the Singapore Eye Research Institute, which discovered that one in three Indians here suffer from diabetes

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# DIABETES

## Sweet surrender

FROM PAGE 1

and risk suffering eye diseases. In India, only one in five suffer from diabetes. The findings released in February noted that, of the Indians here aged above 60, the prevalence of them having diabetes increased to nearly 50 per cent.

Unlike diseases like the dreaded Big C (cancer), diabetes is not obviously fatal. But neglect and high blood glucose levels over time could result in severe infections, kidney disorders, blindness, coronary heart disease, and even death.

According to the Diabetic Society of Singapore statistics, diabetes is the fifth most-common medical condition, and one of the top six killer diseases in the country. Type 1 diabetes, usually diagnosed in childhood, is sometimes known as juvenile diabetes. In this case, the body does not produce any insulin, a hormone that is used to convert starch and sugar (glucose) into energy. But in Type 2 diabetes – the most common – the body produces insufficient levels of insulin. And so, when insulin is absent or inadequate, the glucose that should go to the cells stays in the blood, causing complications. It is usually diagnosed in adulthood, typically between the ages of 30 and 49, when physical activity levels are found to be the lowest.

So what actually causes it? Predominantly, a family history of the disease along with stress, a sedentary lifestyle and irregular and unhealthy eating habits are all thought to be the main factors. Most often, the warning signs of diabetes go unnoticed (see report below). This was the case with Ms Chitra Mahesh, a journalist in her 50s. It was only when a severe toothache forced her to visit a doctor that she was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. Worse, the doctor said she had been suffering from the disease for over a decade.

Initially put on oral medication, she soon found that it was not enough. "At the time, I wasn't being careful with my diet. I had a very stressful lifestyle and ended up eating at irregular intervals," admits Ms Mahesh, a Chennai resident who visits Singapore often for work. "For those who are already prone to high sugar levels, stress only makes it worse."

When alternative therapies to control her diabetes, like ayurveda and homeopathy, didn't work, her doctor urged her to get on insulin. According to Prof A. Ramachandran, director of the Diabetes Research Centre & M.V. Hospital for Diabetes in Chennai, Indians are genetically more susceptible to the disease. "Indians have a low threshold for the risk factors. Americans develop diabetes when the body mass index (BMI) is 30 and 35. We develop it when the BMI is only 25," he says.

In recent years, there has also been a sharp rise in the number of young Indian professionals employed in IT, banking and other high-stress, irregular-timing type of work. With high-pressure deadlines, computer-intensive work and no physical activity, food is not being processed properly within the body.

Mr Milind Pasad, an Indian expat who has been working with an international bank in Singapore for four years, is a good example. Diagnosed with diabetes in 2008, during a routine health check, he says: "It has changed my life because I need to be very careful with what I eat. I opt for a lot more green vegetables and complex carbohydrates now."

Although he has a family history of the disease, he says his lifestyle doesn't help: "Traveling frequently for work makes it hard for me to get proper sleep and eat proper meals at regular times. I try to be careful with exercise and go three to four times a week to the gym, but I should really be going every day."

So is diabetes all about genes?

Nutritionist Sheeba Majmudar, a Singapore PR who has lived here for 13 years, says no, and adds that it's not fair to dump the blame for the high incidence of the disease among Indians on genetics.

"The diabetes level in our Indian ancestors wasn't so high. I think that it's the choice that we are making today in terms of food and physical activity that is to blame," she says. "For example, we use refined oils in cooking, instead of the ghee that was used before, because we have been told that this oil is good. In fact, it's really bad. There is a lot of misinformation out there."

Sometimes, women with a family history of diabetes could face the problem only during pregnancy. In gestational diabetes, the placenta, which nourishes the baby as it grows, also produces hormones that make it difficult for the mother's body to use insulin, therefore resulting in insulin resistance. So the unborn baby is at risk of having high blood sugar and being overweight.

Ms Archana Abraham, 25, was diagnosed with gestational diabetes in her 27th week of pregnancy. And the feelings that washed over her were frustration and guilt because she knew she was a potential candidate for this condition which runs in her family.

"I should have been more careful," says Ms Abraham who has been living in Singapore for two years. "Now I have to worry about my baby's health all the time when this is something I could have easily avoided. I have been asked to completely cut out sugar from my diet – this includes direct sugars as well as natural sugars. So fruit juices, potatoes, beetroot are a strict no-no."

Another high-risk candidate for diabetes is Mrs Kelly Puri, 31. "My mother was diagnosed with gestational diabetes when she was pregnant with me, and she retained it afterwards," says the British national of Indian origin who works for the Singapore arm of a UK brokering company. "I had gestational diabetes too and, although I am clear now, I am still at very high risk for getting Type 2 diabetes."

Once diabetes has set in, there is no cure... only lifelong management through care and control. Frequent blood tests to check sugar levels are important and several DIY blood glucose tests are available in the market. Insulin or some other oral medication, as prescribed by the doctor, should be taken regularly and it is very important to pay attention to the feet, mouth and skin because diabetics are more prone to problems in these areas.

Dr Krishna Reddy, a dentist at Pacific Healthcare Specialist Centre, says she always asks patients with gum infections if their blood sugar levels are in control. "Diabetes worsens gum conditions. If there are fluctuations in blood sugar levels, then it shows up in the mouth. Once it is out of control, it results in bone loss and shaky teeth. Trying to strengthen gums and teeth after that is very difficult. That's why, today, a lot of diabetes treatments are focused on gum and teeth care. Regular monitoring and maintenance are very important," says Dr Reddy.

Eventually, this disease is about lifelong management. By watching their diet and increasing physical activity, people with diabetes can live healthy lives. "My father is more than 80 years old, and he has had diabetes for 30 years, with no complications. He is extremely disciplined about his lifestyle," says Ms Mahesh. That should be heartening news for all the diabetes patients out there.

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**Indians have a low threshold for the risk factors. Americans develop diabetes when the body mass index (BMI) is 30 and 35. We develop it when the BMI is only 25.**

— Prof A. Ramachandran

### WARNING SIGNS

Nutritionist Sheeba Majmudar tells tabla! that it is best to diagnose this disease early, at the "pre-diabetes stage" – when sugar levels are above normal but have not yet reached diabetic levels. At this stage, it can be kept in check. Here are some warning signs to look out for:

- Extreme fatigue
- Increased hunger and thirst
- Unexplained weight loss
- Nausea
- Increased urination
- Blurred vision
- Loss of feeling in feet or hands.

As several of these could be signs of other ailments, it is important to have regular health and blood checks in order to identify the real problem.

## 50.7 million diabetes patients in India in 2010

INDIA'S health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad said on April 20 that the country has lined up a Rs500-crore plan to control non-communicable diseases like diabetes and stroke.

"As per a report published by International Diabetes Federation, cases of diabe-

tes (in the 20 to 79 age group) in the year 2010 in India are projected to be around 50.7 million, the highest in the list of countries that were part of the study," he informed the Rajya Sabha.

He added that the health ministry has drafted a National Programme for Preven-

tion and Control of Diabetes, Cardiovascular Disease and Stroke) which aims to prevent and control non-communicable diseases like diabetes through behaviour and lifestyle changes.

Indo-Asian News Services

## Fight Type 2 diabetes by eating right

AS HEAD dietitian of Eat Wise, a professional nutrition and dietetics consultancy in Singapore, Ms Bibi Chia (below) is well versed in the benefits of maintaining a healthy diet. She tells tabla! about the connection between diabetes and food:

### How can food affect the onset of diabetes?

Ms Chia: Diabetes is mainly a result of genetics but eating right and doing exercise can reverse or prevent the disease. Obesity which could be the result of unhealthy eating – too much fat, not enough fibre and too many simple carbohydrates – is bad because fat interferes with the body's ability to use insulin.

### What kind of food causes diabetes?

No specific food causes diabetes. However, we do encourage people to eat healthy and maintain a healthy weight to prevent it. This includes cutting back on food with a high fat content,

especially saturated fat.

### How can one ensure balanced nutrition and reduce the risk of diabetes?

Eat according to the healthy diet pyramid, which is five to six servings of rice and rice alternatives, two to three servings of meat and meat alternatives, two servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit daily. Opt for low fat versions when it comes to dairy products, pick lean cuts of meat and consume less deep-fried food. Cut back on the coconut milk, cooking oil and margarine when cooking and use herbs and spices to flavour your dishes instead of using too much salt. Limit the intake of sugar-loaded items like cakes, candy and chocolates.

When out grocery shopping, choose Healthier Choice products... the ones with a red pyramid on it.

For more information on healthy eating, log on to [www.eatwiseintl.com](http://www.eatwiseintl.com)



## FIGHT BACK

FIVE ways to keep diabetes in check, as listed by the Ministry of Health:

- Reduce intake of sugar, (white) rice and (white) bread
- Reduce intake of fats
- Increase intake of wholemeal bread, brown rice, vegetables and other high fibre foods
- Exercise regularly
- Lose weight/maintain an "ideal" weight

(Log on to <http://www.diabetes.org.sg> for more details)

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