



# **Diabetes in the South Asian Community**

**By Andrea Gillette, Research Associate, AshaUSA**

## **Background**

Diabetes affects more than 25.8 million people in the United States (CDC) and more than 347 million people worldwide (WHO). This number is rising rapidly and the International Diabetes Federation describes diabetes as “one of the major health and development challenges of the 21st century” (IDF.org). The South Asian population worldwide, and in immigrant communities such as the United States specifically, has a considerably higher risk of developing diabetes than most other populations.

Studies clearly show that diabetes is one of the major health problems facing those of South Asian descent. 8.6% of the population in India is estimated to have had diabetes in 2013 (Guariguata et al). That rate is projected to climb to 10.6% by 2035 (ibid). Immigrant populations have, if anything, greater risk of developing diabetes. The United Kingdom reports that, in general, those of South Asian descent are much more likely to have diabetes than the general public. Groups most at risk include Indian men, with a 10.1% risk (as compared to 4.3% risk for men in the overall population) (diabetes-help.co.uk). In the United States, a study conducted between 2002 and 2008 in New York City concluded that South Asians with a normal BMI were almost 5 times more likely than comparable Caucasians to have diabetes (Gupta et al) South Asians, then, are clearly a population with a high rate of diabetes as compared to other populations.

## **What is diabetes?**

- “Diabetes is a long-term condition that causes high blood sugar levels.”<sup>1</sup> It does this by affecting the levels of the hormone that allows the body to absorb sugars, called insulin.

*There are two kinds of diabetes:*

- Type 1: “The body does not produce insulin.”<sup>2</sup>
- Type 2: “The body does not produce enough insulin for proper function, or the cells in the body do not react to insulin (insulin resistance)”<sup>3</sup>.

## **What are the long term risks?**

*Health complications with diabetes can include...*

- “Eye complications – including glaucoma, cataracts
- Foot complications - neuropathy, ulcers, and sometimes gangrene which may require that the foot be amputated
- Hypertension.. which can raise the risk of kidney disease, eye problems, heart attack and stroke
- Hearing loss
- Gum disease
- Stroke ”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (MediLexicon International Ltd 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> (MediLexicon International Ltd 2014)



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## What are risk factors for diabetes?

- Obesity
- High Sugar Diets
- Family History
- Lack of Exercise
- High BMI

Additionally, studies have shown that people of South Asian descent have around 5 times higher risk of contracting diabetes than the general public<sup>5</sup>.

## How do you know if you have diabetes?

According to the CDC, symptoms of diabetes include:

- “Frequent urination
- Excessive thirst
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme hunger
- Sudden vision changes
- Tingling or numbness in hands or feet
- Feeling very tired much of the time
- Very dry skin
- Sores that are slow to heal
- More infections than usual.”<sup>6</sup>

*If you have these symptoms, see a doctor, who can perform the tests necessary to determine if you have diabetes.*

## Prevention

- *Monitor Your BMI*
  - BMI, or body mass index, is a way to calculate how much of your body weight is made up of fat. High percentages of fat lead to higher risk of diabetes.
- *Exercise*
  - Go on a walk outdoors
  - Practice yoga
  - When sitting for extended periods, get up and stretch or walk back and forth
- *Eat fewer simple sugars*
  - Fewer desserts
  - Substitute brown rice for white rice
  - Use whole grain flours
- *Eat less fat*
  - Use dairy, or substitute low fat versions
  - Use vegetables instead of meat
  - Eat less fried foods
- *Be aware of your family history*
  - If other people in your family have diabetes, your risk of having it also is higher.

<sup>5</sup> (Gupta et al)

<sup>6</sup> (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014)



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## Further Information

The Canadian Diabetes Association has a sample diet for South Asians with diabetes at the website below:

<http://www.diabetes.ca/diabetes-and-you/healthy-living-resources/multicultural-resources/diabetes-in-the-south-asian-community>

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has information about many aspects of diabetes, from prevention to treatment on its website.

<http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/>

The American Diabetes Association also has comprehensive resources and information.

<http://www.diabetes.org/>

*AshaUSA is focused on fostering health and harmony in the South Asian community living in Minnesota. Visit [www.AshaUSA.org](http://www.AshaUSA.org) to get details.*

*If you have any questions, please send an email to [info@ashausa.org](mailto:info@ashausa.org)*

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