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Plants to the rescue

BCJ Hospital & Asha Parekh Research Centre recommends a whole plant-based diet to reverse diabetes and keep lifestyle diseases in check. Say no to animal products and oil and you're off medication too, they claim. Come September, they will start a tiffin service and cooking classes for diabetics

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Moeena Halim

Since last year, Dr Suketu Shah, CEO, BCJ Hospital & Asha Parekh Research Centre, was desperate to rid himself of diabetes, hypertension and obesity. The three lifestyle diseases were preventing him from visiting Kailash Mansarovar, a high-altitude journey he wanted to make along with Morari Bapu, a popular spiritual leader. He had been on medication since 2007, to keep these diseases in check, but was keen on finding a permanent solution.



Nutritionists at BCJ Hospital & Asha Parekh Research Centre, Dr Rashmi Bhanushali and Dr Mahek Makhija, guide the cooks at the hospital kitchen as they make the special whole plant based diet food. Pics/Sunil Tiwari

"Last year my friend, Dr Nandita Shah, introduced me to Dr Neal Barnard's book on reversing diabetes. I tried it. The results were amazing. In about four months, I had reversed my diabetes, hypertension and obesity. For the first time in five years my body index, sugar, Hb1Ac, cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure levels were in the normal range, without medication. I felt very energetic. I could successfully accomplish my dream of going to Kailash. Even a year later now, my reports are still normal. I have also lost 22 kg," reveals Dr Shah.



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So impressed was he with the results that he decided to introduce it to patients at the hospital's Lifestyle Medical Centre, which was set up in June 2012. The programme is a combination of a whole plant-based diet and routine exercise (especially walking).

"It was cheap, easy and beneficial, and could either eliminate medication entirely or keep its requirement low, so I decided to introduce people to it at the centre through various ways such as cooking classes, seminars and a tiffin service," he explains. The centre began recommending the diet to patients in June this year. While the patients admitted at the hospital are offered the diet food, they are not forced, he adds.



Red rice idlis are served for breakfast at BCJ Hospital & Asha Parekh Research Centre

More than vegan

Nutritionists Dr Mahek Makhija and Dr Rashmi Bhanushali, armed with books that Dr Shah passed on to them, had the tough task of Indianising the recipes for the centre and its patients. The diet, similar to the vegan diet, allows no animal products — so no milk, cheese or curd and obviously no meat. "This is because Insulin like Growth Factor (IGF) is found in dairy products which is similar in structure to insulin that takes the place of insulin on the receptors. According to Dr Neal Barnard, fat is the cause of all diseases, which is why all fat is eliminated from the meal. No oil is used while cooking, and no animal fat is consumed," explains Dr Makhija.

"There are a lot of alternatives and once you get used to this way of eating, you don't miss these ingredients. For instance, instead of milk we recommend soy milk or peanut milk," says Dr Makhija, while Dr Bhanushali nods in agreement. Both doctors have introduced their families to this diet too. "Although our children are young and don't suffer from lifestyle diseases yet, following this diet will prevent them from getting diabetes or hypertension when they're older," explains Dr Makhija.

Who said diet food was boring?

The doctors have been working closely with the cooks in the hospital kitchen. Together, they cook up some pretty creative dishes. From red rice idlis for breakfast to idli open sandwiches as a starter at lunch, the diet food seems far from boring. The doctors have also managed to find a replacement for chhaas — peanut milk chhaas. "For the recipe, you'll have to come visit our clinic," laughs Dr Bhanushali. "We don't just tell our patients what to eat, we also tell them how they can cook these foods. We give them recipes," she adds.

The doctors also plan to start cooking classes for diabetics in September. "Ideally, we'd like couples to attend, so the spouse will know how to care for his/ her diabetic partner," says Dr Makhija. While deciding on a menu, the doctors are careful to create a balanced meal. "The body requires a certain amount of oil and we ensure we provide that amount. For instance, we use whole peanuts or suggest the use of olives instead of olive oil," informs Dr Makhija. They also suggest eating fruits and veggies whole — without peeling them. "An advantage of the diet is that diabetics don't have to restrict their intake of fruits. We can eat as much whole carbohydrates as we wish and diabetes will still be reversed," adds Dr Bhanushali.

Take-away tiffins

For the convenience of patients who are too busy to cook, the centre has also started a tiffin service. The food, which is prepared in the hospital canteen's kitchen, is doled out in plastic bags for the moment and has to be picked up from the hospital. "We will start a delivery service once we have 100 customers," says Dr Makhija.

however, each patient's diet has to be tailor-made, the doctors explain. We need to know a person's medical history before we start giving them a tiffin. For instance, we wouldn't give a patient suffering from thyroid soy milk because it is harmful for him," says Dr Makhija. The doctors offer the tiffin service (which is currently lunch-only) once the relevant tests are conducted, for Rs 150 per meal. Although they recommend it primarily to diabetics, the diet also helps patients with other lifestyle diseases such as high blood pressure and obesity.

Missing milk

For 53 year-old Sapna Sabani, a patient at BCJ Hospital & Asha Parekh Research Centre, sticking to the diet was quite a challenge for the first month. "I was a milk lover and enjoyed drinking chai. I used to miss it a lot, but now I've become a green tea drinker," says Sabani, who has been suffering from diabetes for the past 15 years. "Another challenge has been to cook vegetables without using oil. Veggies like bhindi and cauliflower just don't taste the same, so I avoid those," she adds. But it is worth it, she insists, because for the first time in all these years her sugar levels have fallen. "I'm still on medication and take insulin injections, but it has only been three months and I am hoping to get better."

Good, but challenging

Keen on getting another perspective, we met Dr Hira Mahajan, an independent nutritionist, to ask for her opinion. We took her a tiffin prepared at the centre, comprising palak-corn bhaji, missal, sprouts salad, chapatti, red rice pulao and soya tikkis, and she enjoyed the food. "Not only is it delicious, it is also a very well-balanced meal," said Dr Mahajan. Although she was impressed by the diet, she understood that most people might find it difficult to turn vegan and not use oil. She sees no harm in milk products and suggests a katori of curd with every meal



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