

HEALTH

A new recipe for fighting diabetes

Educational programs spring up in Peel Region as number of South Asians in Ontario stricken by disease climbs

BY CIGDEM ILTAN

Siva Swaminathan is always thinking about the food she puts in her mouth - but it's not just because she's a chef.

After she was diagnosed with diabetes five years ago, Ms. Swaminathan decided to put her skill in the kitchen toward a good cause and teach other diabetics how to make food to best manage their disease through her Toronto cooking school.

"I want to demystify food and bring passion back to food for diabetics," she said. "You shouldn't have to cook a separate meal if there is someone with diabetes at home."

Ms. Swaminathan devotes much of her time to creating modifications to South Asian recipes, because 30 to 40 per cent of her students are South Asian, she said.

The Council of Agencies Serving South Asians estimates 11 to 14 per cent of South Asians in Ontario have diabetes, compared to 5 to 6 per cent of "non-racialized" Ontarians. And a recent study in the Canadian Medical Association Journal showed new Canadians, particularly South Asians, have a significantly higher risk of developing diabetes than long-term residents.

Educational programs and campaigns have been springing up in Peel Region - almost a quarter of the residents in the region identify as South Asian, according to Statistics Canada - and the number of South Asians with diabetes in Ontario continues to climb.

Genetics play a part in diabetes risk, but lifestyle choices such as eating and exercise habits and socioeconomic factors also determine who gets the disease and who doesn't, said Andrea Strath, regional director for the Canadian Diabetes Association in the GTA and central eastern Ontario.

Many South Asians who come to Canada experience a complete turnaround in their



Siva Swaminathan, who teaches cooking classes for diabetics and is a diabetic herself, prepares gazpacho barley salad with peaches and corn at her home in Toronto. 'I want to demystify food and bring passion back to food for diabetics.' FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

lifestyles, Ms. Strath said.

"It's not a daily trip to the market to pick out the fresh foods you want, but rather jamming bag loads of calorie-rich, nutrient-poor foods into the back of the station wagon every two weeks and going home," she said.

Some of Ms. Swaminathan's South Asian students cook carbohydrate-heavy foods such as chapati and rice using old family recipes and techniques, so it can be difficult to convince them that healthy alternatives can be just as tasty, she said.

"They learn from their grandmother's recipes that are passed on for generations, and you don't want to insult them - you've got to be very sensitive," said Ms. Swaminathan, who immigrated to Canada from India as a child.

The Punjabi Community

Health Services centre in Peel Region began an aggressive diabetes awareness campaign last November after it received government funding, said health promotion manager Asma Khan.

"There are an alarming number of South Asians suffering from diabetes," Ms. Khan said. "We want them to understand how critical the issue is, and we are getting very good results."

Their approach is two pronged: The organization helps mainstream health-care providers in Peel Region learn more about the South Asian population so they can develop culturally appropriate diabetes programs, and also holds workshops for South Asians on diabetes risk factors and complications, she said.

The centre uses South Asian

newspapers, radio and television shows to promote the programs, Ms. Khan said.

A bigger, brand-new space, not the South Asian population, is what drew Trillium Health Centre's diabetes management centre from Etobicoke to its current home in Mississauga last November, but it's a useful coincidence, said team leader Stacey Horodezny. About 20 to 30 per cent of the centre's patients are South Asian, Ms. Horodezny said.

The centre started a small South Asian diabetes program in 1999, but demand and increased funding have caused it to grow exponentially, she said. It took some time to establish relationships in the South Asian community, but staff now work with neighbourhood programs, com-

munity leaders and physicians to spread the word, Ms. Horodezny said.

The Canadian Diabetes Association also set up a South Asian chapter three years ago to target rising rates in the population using programs tailored for the community. The branch, chaired by Ms. Swaminathan, recruits respected members of the South Asian community to talk at workshops and creates culturally specific tools to teach people about diabetes, Ms. Strath said.

The chapter makes it easier to reach out to a community where many people attach a stigma to diabetes, Ms. Swaminathan said.

"It is very difficult for people to attend these meetings and to come forward and say 'Oh, I have diabetes,'" she said.