



# Modified Cooking

## *& Healthier Meal Planning for South Asians*

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South Asian food has ancient roots going back to the Indian subcontinent, and various parts of South Asia have different staple diets due to its geography and climate. South Asian food also comes in many courses depending on whether the large meal is lunch or dinner.

South India and Sri Lanka have a rice-based diet with foods like idly, dosai, string hoppers, appam, pongal and upuma; as well as a vegetarian diet with dhal-based sauces/stews or hot meat curries flavoured with coconut. North India has a wheat-based diet with foods like roti, naan, paratha, kachori; as well as rice and pungent curries with sweet spices. West India has a rice and wheat-based diet with lots of fish; and Pakistan has a wheat and rice-based diet with lots of meat.

South Asians living in Canada bring their food habits without making any changes to the climate we live in, or the lifestyle we lead. We have four seasons in Canada, and for six months of the year (November to April), we tend to hibernate inside due to the cold winter. During these months we live a sedentary life, going outside only when needed for work, shopping, visiting friends or to a place of worship. But we don't tend to venture outside for a walk or to exercise when our sidewalks are covered in snow or ice. This is where our eating habits do not keep up with our lifestyle of consuming a large meal in hibernation without any daily exercise.

When shopping, we take the car and park close to the entrance. This habit of ours has unhealthy consequences. You've heard of the term "rice belly," and as South Asians we tend to put weight (belly fat) on our midsection due to our diet. This puts strain on the organs, including the pancreas where we build insulin resistance, and can lead to pre-diabetes, and eventually type-2 diabetes.

A typical South Asian diet consists of a breakfast, which is rice or wheat-based with a potato curry and a cup of sweet coffee or chai. For lunch, it's rice or wheat-based foods with curries and a lot of carbohydrate, salt and oil. In the evening, tiffin, followed by a cup of a sweet chai or coffee with a fried savoury or sweet snack loaded with lots of salt or sugar. Dinner is very similar to lunch depending when you have your largest meal.

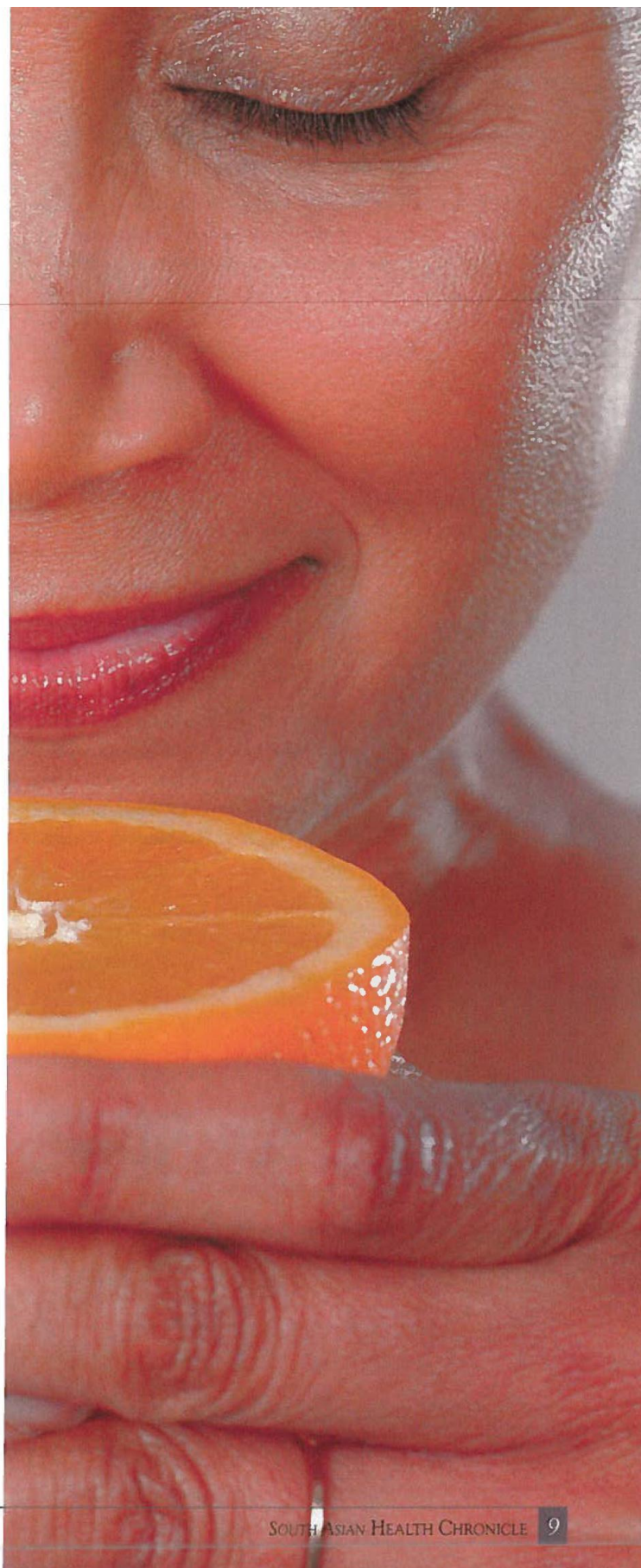
What is wrong with this diet? The typical South Asian diet fails in Canada due to its high carbohydrate, salt and fat content,



without any portion control or exercise. Since we live in the world of “convenience food,” with husband and wife working, and leaving very little time to cook something healthier—we have also adapted to an unhealthy lifestyle in Canada. This means eating foods that are “over-processed,” such as white flour and white rice, where the nutrients have been stripped with no fibre for the body. We also tend to shop for items that are “over-packed,” where the whole dish comes in a box, and just adding water or putting in the oven will get the whole meal ready. These foods tend to have too much salt. Salt is a natural preservative and it gives shelf life to food, so these food items tend to stay on a grocery shelf for months. The result is that we are consuming too much salt, resulting in hypertension and cardio vascular diseases (CVD).

These days, many restaurants offers buffets or all-you-can-eat, and we tend to take advantage of it to stretch our dollar. Unfortunately we also tend to stretch our stomach by over-eating to get our money's worth. Then there are Western-style fast food places: where we indulge ourselves in various combo meals, including burgers or fried chicken with fries and a pop, or endless pizza with unlimited soft drinks. These type of meals are high in calories, fat, salt and sugar. We also have Eastern-style takeout food where the whole meal is pre-packaged in a South Asian grocery store, and we buy them in large quantities and store them for future use. Lastly, in the category of “convenience food,” we tend to eat food “on the run,” chewing and swallowing mindlessly while driving or watching TV; and we pay very little attention to what and how much we are eating.

How can we change our food habits and eat healthier? Here are some healthier food tips you can follow to avoid diabetes and CVD. Instead of white rice, try brown rice. It has more fibre, and it will breakdown slower into sugar and give you even blood glucose without spiking like white refined products. Instead of naan, eat chapatti or roti made with hard whole wheat flour with fibre. Avoid drinking pop or juice as they contain lots of sugar. Instead, drink water or eat the whole fruit which has more fibre. Avoid cooking with ghee, butter, margarine, lard or shortening, which are high in saturated fat and one of the biggest causes of CVD. Instead, cook with canola oil, which is





a very good source of mono-unsaturated fats and has a high smoke point for South Asian cooking. Instead of potato, opt for sweet potato. It doesn't contain more sugar than potatoes and, ounce for ounce, it has more fibre and is rich in potassium.

Here are some healthy kitchen tips you can use to modify your cooking. Instead of frying, try to bake, broil, steam or poach dishes (e.g. kofta and vadi can be steamed or baked). Instead of cooking with paneer or cheese, cook with firm tofu. Marinate the tofu the night before in herbs, lemon and spice, and the result will be healthier and delicious. Give rice and wheat a break, and try other whole grains and flours. There are many varieties full of fibre and nutrients. Instead of using margarine, butter or mayonnaise for sandwiches, modify recipes with yogurt, lemon, herbs and spices.

Pay more attention to a healthier lifestyle. Read the food labels and take notice of the fat, salt, sugar and carb ratios, and look for healthier alternatives. Pick a day to cook together with your family, and make large meals and store them for the future. Instead of paying for a fancy gym membership, put on comfortable clothing and shoes, and go for a 30-50 minute walk with your spouse or a friend. Encourage your children to watch less TV or play video games—and to get active. Good dietary planning, wholesome routines, exercising regularly: these are essential to living a long, healthy life.



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