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Against the norm

Sangeetha Devi Dundoo



Dr. Nandita Shah Photo: G. Ramakrishna

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Dr. Nandita Shah puts forth her arguments for a plant-based diet to reverse diabetes

A lethargic lifestyle that doesn't factor in time for optimum exercise and relying on refined, processed food are said to be major contributors to obesity and diabetes. Dr. Nandita Shah, founder of SHARAN (Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature), who was in town for talks and workshops on reversing diabetes, feels dairy also contributes to diabetes. Her arguments seem tough to accept since it goes against what has been followed over generations.

Talking to us at Goethe Zentrum, she explains, "Animals are governed by instinct. A cow knows it has to eat grass and a lion knows it has to eat meat. We are confused. The first thing our parents give us is milk before we can even think. Instinctively, children refuse to drink milk. Parents add sugar, chocolate or even tea and coffee to somehow make a child drink milk. Everyone knows that mammal produces milk for its young. No animal drinks the milk produced by another species."

Dr. Nandita says research has shown that the protein in milk is a contributor to type-1 diabetes, earlier termed juvenile diabetes. "A lot of research has been done and not much says milk is good for you. I see more and more children with diabetes — 14-year-olds dependant on insulin and kidney failure by 25. Type-1 diabetes is an auto immune disorder and studies show that most type-1 diabetics have been fed cow's milk," she says.

To explain further, she states, "Our bodies are designed to heal and not produce antibodies that destroy cells in our own body. The protein in cow's milk is similar to that of pancreatic protein. Our body produces antibodies against this protein and these antibodies also destroy pancreatic cells. Young mothers now feed children formula-based milk that is made from cow's milk."

How feasible is adopting a vegan lifestyle for children? At a birthday party or a picnic, a child is likely to reach out for cake or ice cream. "Most children follow a vegetarian diet and have no problem in saying so. Why should it be a problem to say we are vegans?" she asks.

A part of her children's workshop also teaches parents to make desserts using alternate milks from soy, almonds, cashews, peanuts, unrefined sugar or jaggery, dates and so on. "Many vegetarian Indians who travel to or reside abroad make an extra effort to source vegetarian food, even if it is difficult, so why not vegan? One is never far away from fruits, vegetables, seeds and nuts," she says.

She agrees that eating out will not be easy but says, "One has to choose between health and staying sick. Children who switch to vegan diets have lesser instances of colds, coughs and are intellectually better."

For adults with type-2 diabetes and hypertension, apart from refraining from processed foods (cookies, chips et al), she

also suggests cutting down or avoiding tea and coffee, oil and all animal fat. To the sceptical, she suggests following these protocols at home for a month. “It’s just a month, not a lifetime,” she suggests. “We conduct a 21-day residential programme in which I’ve seen participants struggle without caffeine in the first week but towards the end, see the difference. I urge participants to take lab reports before and after their change in diet plan. Our bodies are alkaline in nature and when we avoid acid-causing foods, the difference is there for us to see when one follows a complete plant-based diet. If conventional methods hold good, why do we have osteoporosis despite drinking so much milk? Countries consuming milk have high rates of osteoporosis.”

There are enough studies that argue yogurt to be a super food with health benefits. Dr. Nandita’s methods haven’t been received without scepticism in the medical fraternity. She cites cases where a few doctors have themselves followed her system and experienced the difference but not many may endorse it. “At the end of any workshop, I am asked how a diet can work out without curd. I don’t try to convince people. I show them how curd made with alternate milk and encourage them to try it out,” she says.

To reiterate why she suggests going vegan, she says, “Exercise and lifestyle changes help in controlling diabetes, stress and hypertension among other conditions. But unless we remove the cause, milk protein, it is tough to reverse diabetes.”

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