

Nouveau-rich Indian diet a silent killer?

Gitanjali Chandrasekharan, Mumbai Mirror | Jul 31, 2014, 12.00 AM IST



Three years ago, Worli-resident Deepak Loyalka began experiencing muscle and nerve pain. This was coupled with light sensitivity. Anything he ate would lead to bloating. Within a year, he put on 20 kilos.

"I tried everything, and visited a string of doctors - endocrinologists, orthopaedics, neurologists. They were flummoxed about the cause of the symptoms, let alone be able to find a cure. All they came up with was that these were classical symptoms of anxiety," says the 42-year-old entrepreneur

A friend suggested he meet homeopath Dr Nandita Shah, who runs the non-profit, Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN). "I was expecting to receive homeopathic pills. Instead, she asked me to cut all oil and dairy from my diet," Loyalka adds. Automatically, the starch content in

his meals -potatoes, beans, corn, sweet potatoes, rajma, chana - increased. "Essentially, I was put on the McDougall diet," he says. Initially, he admits, the idea of dietary change curing him of the symptoms seemed hard to believe. "But, I had run out of options and said, why not try this out."

Within a month of switching to a low-fat, whole-foods, plant-based diet named after American physician Dr John McDougall, Loyalka claims he began to experience gradual relief from the symptoms. Within four months he was almost cured of what he suspects were the first signs of an auto-immune disease.

Granny's Diet

As he discusses the benefits of switching to a plant-based, predominantly starch-centric diet, Dr McDougall, who is in Mumbai this week to conduct seminars on reversal and prevention of disease with nutrition for SHARAN, throws up a challenge. "Let's go out on the streets and find one person who is not ill." As we sit, firmly in our seats knowing that wager will be lost even before we leave the room, he says it's rich foods that cultures across the world have begun adopting in the last 30 years that are the culprit.

"When I was working in Hawaii in the 1960s, I noticed that the third generation migrants from Philippines, Korea, Japan, China, were fat and unhealthy. Their grandparents, who had grown up in their home countries and continued their starch-based diets, were healthy and slim," he says, highlighting the increased inclusion of fried foods into meals. It's no different in India, he says. "Thirty years ago, people wouldn't eat as much rich food as they do now. There was far less oil, and very little meat. Rice and sugar, in fact, are not problematic. Indians have always had

plenty of sugar in their diet, and starch is good for the body. Across the world, most ancient societies have subsisted on starch-based diets," he says, challenging modern dietary theories that say starch is evil.

Dr Shah adds that even the belief that several cultures subsist on a predominantly meat diet is not true. "Thirty years ago, when I'd go to Europe to teach, I'd be told that fish was eaten on Fridays and other meats on Sundays. Only vegetarian meals were served the rest of the week," she says, adding that even breakfast menus at hotels consisted of rolls and breads. Today, they serve a variety of meats. With increased incomes, India's old dietary habits too have seen a massive change.

Oil = Poison

Dr McDougall, who is scheduled to speak at Bandra's ADAPT (formerly The Spastics Society of India) today and at the Kohinoor Business School in Kurla tomorrow, says that at a time when India is battling a diabetes epidemic, the focus on cutting down sugar is not the solution. "By not addressing increased oil consumption, you are missing the elephant in the room," he says.

Poly and monosaturated fats -found in large amounts in vegetable oils and fish -have been shown to depress the immune system, increase bleeding and promote cancers, especially those of the colon, prostate and breast. Because all fats are easily stored by the body, too much dietary fat makes people overweight and lays the foundation for a host of problems.

While both fat (used for energy storage when no food or other immediate source of fuel is available) and cholesterol (needed

for critical cellular functions) are part of a normal, healthy body, the body produces all the cholesterol it needs. A vegetarian diet, he argues, can provide the essential fatty acids the body needs to function. Animal foods, including dairy, on the other hand, provide too much fat, especially the harmful kind (saturated fat), which damages the arteries and causes heart disease and strokes. Meat is rich in cholesterol, too.

Battling Myths

Dr McDougall says adult humans don't need milk for calcium. Plant foods contain generous amounts of it. Even a disease like osteoporosis doesn't result from too little calcium, but primarily from acids derived from too much animal protein that rob the body of calcium, weakening the bones. Excess protein (especially animal proteins) cause changes in kidney activity, resulting in large losses of calcium from the body. Eskimos, who consume 250 to 400 gms of proteins through fish, whale or walrus meats and 2,200 mg of calcium from fish bone daily, have the highest incidence of osteoporosis in any population in the world.

It's been two years since Loyalka has been following the recommended diet. He says not only has he lost the weight he had put on, he feels healthier. "The only supplements I take are for Vitamin B12, but that's something even meat-eaters are deficient in," he adds.

The McDougall diet -- What Can You Eat: Dr McDougall advises incorporating more starch in your meals. Starch is the primary source of energy, and it alone provides energy for red blood cells and certain cells of the kidneys. It's the preferred fuel for the central nervous system, including the brain. There are no

carbohydrates in meat and fish, and most dairy products contain little of it.

Avoid: Cow's milk, butter, cheese, cottage cheese, yoghurt, sour cream, ice cream, eggs, meat, mayonnaise, vegetable oils, sugar, white rice, white flour, refined and sugar-coated cereals, chocolate, coffee and colas.