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Reversing type-2 diabetes with a plant-based diet?

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By
**Catherine
Douglas**



Diabetes is reaching epidemic proportions in Sri Lanka and around the world. According to recent statistics by the International Diabetes Federation (IDF), the prevalence of diabetes among adults in Sri Lanka is at 8.5% of the

population (about one in 12 adults) - roughly 1.16 million

people.

It comes with severe complications including loss of energy, loss of eyesight, heart disease, kidney failure, male impotency, complications in pregnancy for women, obesity, gangrene, stroke and in serious cases, can result in death.

Youth diabetes is on the rise

In the past, type 2 diabetes was mainly seen in adults over 40, but according to the Diabetes Association of Sri Lanka, one in five under 20s has abnormal blood sugar due to diabetes or pre-diabetes. The reasons? While genetic predisposition is a strong factor, in case of type 2 diabetes, diet, physical inactivity, smoking, alcohol and stress can all contribute towards a diagnosis. As seen in countries all across Asia that historically have had low rates of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke, improving economic situations cause people to move away from traditional plant-centric foods that are usually high in fibre, vitamins and minerals, to a more processed diet of fast foods that are high in saturated fat, salt and sugar. People's lives become more sedentary as manual labour is replaced by office work and devices and electronics take precedent over outdoor activities.

The current recommended treatment suggested by the Diabetes Association of Sri Lanka is a mixture of medication and lifestyle changes that include diet including minimally processed cereals, legumes, vegetables and fruits, meat (fish and chicken preferable over red meat and shellfish) and reducing sugar, salt and fat intake. They also recommend 30 minutes of exercise, three or more times a week, as well as meditation and yoga for keeping stress at a manageable level.

But despite the conventional treatment plans, taxes on sugar, cigarettes and alcohol, and the introduction of the Ministry of Health's preventative screening 'Healthy Lifestyle Centres', cases of diabetes in Sri Lanka are expected to rise to 151 million people by 2045.

So why aren't rates of diabetes decreasing?

A registered medical doctor since 1981, Dr Nandita Shah specialises in homoeopathy and is the founder and director of SHARAN, a group of doctors and other medical professionals who focus on holistic health in India. Their programme advocates a vegan (or whole food plant-based diet) to prevent, treat and ultimately reverse type 2 diabetes, as well as improve the condition for those with type 1. The treatment is based on the research of Dr. Neal Barnard of the non-profit Physicians Committee of Responsible Medicine. On their website, Dr Barnard states 'In a 2003 study funded by the NIH (National Institute of Health), we determined that a plant-based diet controlled blood sugar three times more effectively than a traditional diabetes diet that limited calories and carbohydrates. Within weeks on a plant-based diet, participants saw dramatic health improvements. They lost weight, insulin sensitivity improved, and HbA1c levels dropped. In some cases, you would never know they had the disease, to begin with'.



Dr. Shah also echoed similar sentiments when the Daily Mirror asked her about the success of the programme in India. "In general people with diabetes are advised to reduce their sugar and carbohydrate intake but that never cures diabetes - they still need medicines. Whenever we want to get rid of a problem we should understand the cause and remove it. Sugar is not the cause of diabetes; high blood sugar is the result of diabetes. The cause of diabetes is a lack of insulin or insulin resistance and the main cause of insulin resistance is fat and lack of fibre. All animal products including dairy (milk) are high in fat and lack fibre as only plants have fibre, therefore, a whole plant-based diet is low in fat, full of fibre and thus heals diabetes naturally. In fact, if we always ate the way we are designed to by nature, diabetes would be non-existent."

Designed by nature

The concept of eating food that is designed in nature is part of SHARAN's philosophy that humans, animals and the planet are all interconnected, hence the name SHARAN (Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature). Their medical practitioners perform "Ecologically Sustainable Medicine" (ESM), which seeks to restore the balance between the well-being of humans and the well-being of the planet. Many of the foods patients are asked to avoid also have some of the largest environmental impacts.

For example;

- **Virgin forests are cleared to graze cattle (and to grow genetically modified soya to feed them) as well as the overgrazing of cattle causing desertification.**

- Farm animals consume a larger share of the world's freshwater sources than humans do.
- Methane from cows, sheep, goats etc contribute to global warming.
- Animal manure causes pollution to enter the air and water, which can poison drinking water and cause health problems in humans.



In general people with diabetes are advised to reduce their sugar and carbohydrate intake

- Dr Nandita Shah

Not just salads

The concept of 'eating vegan' can be off-putting for patients as they are concerned they won't be able to enjoy their favourite foods any more and eat only salad, a common misconception when it comes to plant based eating. As part of their treatment plan, Dr Shah's programme teaches patients new cooking techniques and how to recreate meals they are familiar with and are a part of their culture by replacing animal products with plant-based counterparts. Patients will also learn how to get all the required nutrients such as protein, calcium, iron etc from different foods, how to measure their blood sugar and incorporate healthy eating habits into their daily routines.

The programme does not prescribe any medications other than those that patients are already taking what is prescribed by their doctor but through lifestyle changes, Dr. Shah hopes that patients are able to reduce, or even completely eliminate many of the drugs they are taking, especially as medication can be extremely costly.

According to Dr Shah, they have found that type-2 diabetes is almost always reversible and in type-1, where the pancreas does not produce insulin at all, they have seen dramatic improvements in these patients in terms of reduction of the amount of insulin required, and many have reversed their conditions completely.

Situation in Sri Lanka

The Daily Mirror asked the Sri Lankan Diabetic Association for their opinion on a whole, food, plant-based diet to treat type-2 diabetes and while many of their recommendations do align, they advised that they don't recommend cutting out food groups such as meat due to protein requirements.

In Sri Lanka currently, the Daily Mirror was unable to find any doctors that are currently providing the whole food plant based programme for treating type-2 diabetes but with more doctors around the world having positive results, it could only be a matter of time before Sri Lanka start to explore the possibilities of alternative treatments.

DISCLAIMER:

As with any new treatment plan or major diet change, patients should do their own research and speak to a medical professional before making any changes.

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