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Taking her cue from nature

Deepa Ballal Oct 31, 2015



"Animals can cure themselves, why can't we?" asks Dr Nandita Shah, founder of Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN), a non-profit organisation with the goal of spreading awareness about holistic health and an ecologically sustainable, compassionate lifestyle. With growing concerns of global warming, increasing carbon footprints, rising sea levels, unknown diseases and changing climatic conditions, it is high time we realise that following a vegan diet could possibly hold the answers to many of the present day ailments and maladies, maintains the Puducherry-based homeopath.

The growing population has invariably put a lot of pressure on the food industry to churn out something which is faster and easier to grow, one that fetches maximum profit. So, the question that eventually begs for an answer is: 'Is the food I eat really healthy?'

India has the third-highest number of obese and overweight people (11 per cent of adolescents, and 20 per cent of all adults) after US and China. One in every five Indian men and women is either obese or overweight.

Keeping it natural

Having started SHARAN nearly a decade back, Nandita and her team are on a mission to make India diabetes free. From giving cooking demos, conducting health and disease reversal workshops to running a 21-day residential programme in Gokarna, Karnataka, she vociferously advocates a plant-based diet for a healthy life and has immense faith in the healing powers of the body. The objective is to help people understand what the natural diet for the human species is. Going vegan, she believes, is the key to good health — or should one say the only key. She lists excess fat (animal products and refined plant fats), excess protein, lack of fibre and acidic food as the four main nutritional causes of diseases.

Over the years, our relationship with food has changed drastically and we have become disconnected, rues Nandita. "Food is a fuel and we need to put the right fuel. Ironically, most often we put the best fuel in our cars, but not in our bodies. We are the only species who systematically makes our food less nutritious," she says.

We eat for entertainment, for company, to kill boredom and various other reasons. And while eating we text, we type, we watch TV, and now even toddlers eat their food with iPads attached to their prams. Not being mindful of what we shovel into our mouths too contributes to overeating and eventually, putting on excess weight.

"Children, by nature, eat slow, they chew and they don't get the connection when asked to eat fast. The bottom line is that we have to be conscious and aware of so many things," adds Nandita.

The most important thing, according to Nandita is that Indians are brought up with this idea of dairy being good for health. "Cow's milk is a food for the calf to grow to full size in 18 months and contains powerful growth hormones. And if one continues to take it every single day, it is difficult to get over it. Milk products are a part of almost every Indian meal — milk, curd, butter, paneer, cheese, cream, ice cream, buttermilk. In addition, Indians put a lot of oil in the food and there is so much fat, but no usage of the fat. We just don't do any exercise," says Nandita. "The fat you eat, is the fat you wear."

As the second largest milk producing country in the world, there's abundance of milk in the Indian diet. From the milk in our coffee and tea to breads and pastries, our addiction to dairy begins at an early age, observes Nandita. We are the only species who drink the milk of another species, she adds.

"Sadly, milk is a cocktail of pus, antibiotics, hormones and blood. After weaning, humans don't need any milk or milk-based products," contends Nandita. But we continue to rewrite rules to suit our interests, our palate and our pockets. Little do we realise that all of these could be substituted with healthier plant-based alternatives, she says.

Understanding the cause


If you don't understand the cause, you cannot address the problem. "By dieting nobody can reduce weight. Once they stop dieting, all they think of is food. Eat as much as you want, but eat the food which can fill you and is high in nutrition. The quality of food is more important than the combination of food," avers Nandita.

Also, using steel and iron utensils, instead of aluminium and non-stick ware for cooking, and avoiding the microwave, guarantee good health, she says. Nandita is also an advocate of practising kindness and benevolence for one's spiritual wellbeing.

Today, SHARAN has positively impacted the lives of over 20,000 people in India and abroad and some are even working as its 'lifestyle advisors'. Did you know that it takes 21 days to form a habit? To help you transition into a healthy diet, here are nine basic changes that you need to make:

n From refined grain to whole grain.

n From refined sweeteners (like sugar) to unrefined sweeteners (like jaggery, palm sugar)



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Photo Gallery



- n From sweeteners (like dates, raisins and other dried fruits)
- n From juices to whole fruits and vegetables and smoothies (on an empty stomach)
- n From peeled fruit and vegetables to unpeeled and whole fruits and vegetables.
- n From extracted fats (oil and butter) to whole fats like nuts and seeds.
- n From frying and over cooking to poaching, blanching and dry roasting.
- n From all cooked food to 50 per cent fresh and raw food.
- n From pesticide- and chemical-laden food to organic food.
- n From animal-based foods to plant-based fare.

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