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The sweet truth's out

There's a new breed of diabetics in the country and they aren't pill-dependent or helpless with their high sugar levels. A rising number of patients are reversing diabetes through whole plant-based diets and even turning vegan. Two city-based filmmakers are also filming a documentary on the patients who have taken their health in their own hands, finds Phorum Dalal

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Phorum Dalal

In November 2011, 30 year-old Kandivli resident Mayank Bhatia (name changed on request) was diagnosed with Type II diabetes. A weightlifter and a passionate body builder, doctors advised him to stop his rigorous workout regime. "My sugar levels were 300, and I felt lethargic all day," says Bhatia. In February 2012, he came across a one-day seminar on 'reversal' of diabetes in Mumbai. A week later, he landed up at the venue to hear the "impossible". Founded by Pondicherry-based homeopath, Dr Nandita Shah, Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN), a non-profit organisation with the goal of spreading health awareness and an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. It first conducted a workshop Reversing Diabetes in 2009.

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Participants enjoy a healthy, whole plant-based fare at SHARAN, a 21-day workshop, held in Delhi in August 2012. The workshop teaches patients how to reverse diabetes through a whole plant-based diet

At the workshop, Bhatia, along with the other participants, was treated to a lavish spread of food sans oil, sugar and animal protein. "It was tasty, wholesome and healthy food. We were given replacement charts, which helped us replace processed foods and milk with whole plant-based diet. For example, nut or soymilk replaces milk, peanut butter replaces processed butter," says Bhatia, who is now back to his body-building regime.



In April 2010, 56 year-old Ritaa Vazirani signed up for the reverse diabetes programme. "My diabetes was 125 (fasting) and I also suffer from hypertension. After the workshop, I deleted milk products, sugar, oil and animal protein from my diet. Today, I am a borderline diabetic and don't take any pills. I eat all kinds of vegetables and they are cooked just as deliciously, but without oil, of course," says the Chembur resident. Pic/Datta Kumbhar

In India on an average, every fourth person is diabetic, according to Dr Rupa Shah, a Mumbai-based lifestyle medicine expert. "In our country if you go over to someone's home, refusing, say, a gulab jamun or fried pakodas is taken as an insult. And most people, naturally, find it difficult to resist heavy foods. Since January, this year, there is a rise in the number of diabetics wanting to change their helplessness," says Dr Rupa. But there is hope now, she adds. "People have realised that diabetes is a lifestyle disease, which can be resolved with their food intake, regular exercise and stress management. People are now asking questions about what can be done," explains Dr Rupa.



Dr Nandita Shah, founder of SHARAN, conducts a workshop on reversing diabetes

Documenting diabetes

While Dr Nandita conducts seven to eight 21-day workshops on reversing diabetes, along with cooking classes and workshops on other topics all across the country round the year, a Mumbai-based filmmaker has finalised the contents of her next documentary and will shoot a film on reversing diabetes next month. "In India, people don't take diabetes seriously. People believe popping pills is the only cure. It ends up controlling your sugar levels, but not about how you feel?" asks the film director and co-producer.

wish to be named. She plans to cover patients' journeys from the time they adopt a whole plant-based diet. "We aren't propagating anything through our documentary — we are just filming various facts about diabetes. We will be comparing different approaches in the documentary," she says, who is currently looking for case studies and funds for her project. It will be complete by March 2013. "We will cover the reversal process in detail. The film is only part of the larger movement we want to initiate to help people reverse lifestyle diseases," says the filmmaker.



Andheri (east) resident Aruna Bhansali digs into her vegan tiffin lunch (below) which she orders daily. Pic/Nimesh Dave

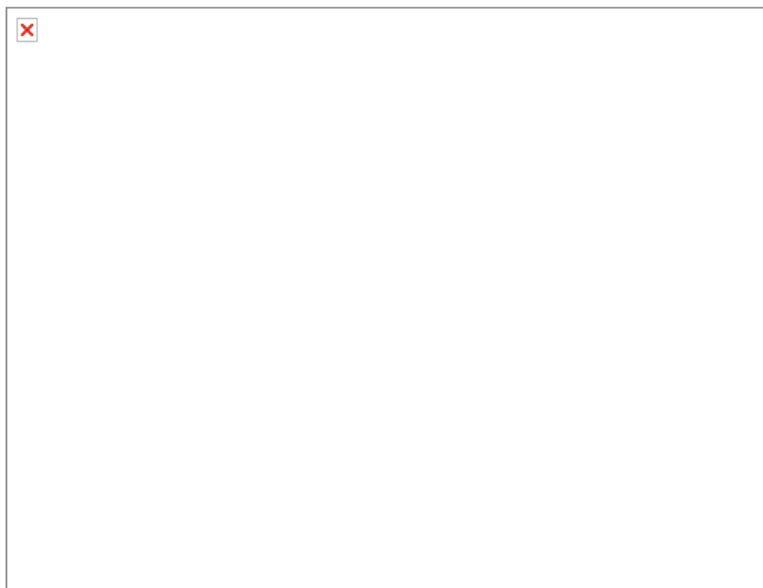


Allopathic doctors too, second whole plant-based diets to reverse diabetes, too. An insulin injection or pills will only control sugar levels, opines Dr Manoj Patel, diabetologist and physician at Hinduja Healthcare Surgical, Khar and Nanavati Hospital, Vile Parle. "But they don't reverse diabetes. It is possible only through diet and exercise. I have a patient who took 100 units of insulin a day, but now, doesn't need any of that. What's challenging here is that this concept needs to become mainstream instead of remaining an anomaly among patients," says Patel.

'I was asked to opt for bariatric surgery'

Seventy year-old Andheri (east) resident Aruna Bhansali, a borderline diabetic took two pills a day for many years. Overweight, she was asked to undergo bariatric surgery last year. On her daughter's advice, Bhansali signed up for a 61 day residential disease reversal program with GUDAM in Calcutta.

21-day residential disease reversal program with SHARAN in Gokarna, Karnataka. "It was our last attempt to avoid surgery," says Bhansali. Back from the workshop, she gave up oil and ghee and changed her diet — breakfast now contains fresh fruits such as orange, pear or apple, lunch consists a vegan tiffin she orders everyday and in the evening, Bhansali's maid cooks oil-free poodas or bhakri. "Diabetics are asked not to eat sweet fruits such as mangoes, but I can eat those, too, as part the of the programme diet," says Bhansali, who practiced personal yoga and meditation at the workshop, apart from enjoying the vegan food. "Today, from two pills a day, I take only one and lost have eight kgs as well," Bhansali smiles into the phone.



Naseem Halim cooks sans oil, butter and ghee using her nonstick cookware. Pic/Neha Parekh

'I cook fried rice without oil'

For the past one month, 62 year-old Naseem Halim, a diabetic since 2008, has made extreme changes in her diet. The Khar resident took up a diet programme with BCJ Hospital & Asha Parekh Research Centre, whose hospital kitchen makes whole plant-based diet food. "Till a month ago, I ate non-vegetarian food twice a week, and drank milk thrice a day. At the recent consultation at the hospital, my son was amused that reversal of diabetes is possible through a plant based diet," says Halim, who introduced green tea instead of coffee, fresh salads and sprouts in her daily diet. "Thankfully, my maid has worked for a lady who was on a similar vegan diet," says Halim and adds that she does not consume paneer, egg, butter, ghee and sugar anymore.

It is not tough to cook that way, she assures. "With a nonstick pan, you really don't need oil for cooking. But it is necessary to compensate the oil. We add ground peanuts, coconut and sesame seeds in the vegetables. In the first two days, I felt weak and uneasy, but now, my energy levels are on an all-time high," says Halim, who has also made brown fried rice without a drop of oil. In less than a month, her sugar levels have dropped from 116 to 108 (fasting) to 145 from 166 (post lunch). "Currently, I am on three pills a day, but my doctor feels I may soon need to take only two," adds Halim.

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