South Asians with Diabetes need culturally specific dietary resources and strategies

What is this research about?
South Asian immigrants to Canada are at a high risk for developing diabetes. Diabetes is a lifelong disease in which a person has high blood sugar because of problems with insulin regulation. Complications of diabetes are less serious when a diabetic properly manages their diabetes.

The Canadian Diabetes Association has published a teaching tool Beyond the Basics: Meal Planning for Healthy Eating, Diabetes Prevention and Management. Feedback from diabetes patients and dietitians is important for understanding cultural needs. Input from these individuals is needed to develop a diabetes intervention that is specific to South Asian culture and includes the major features of their diet.

How can you use this research?
Public Health agencies / government can use this research to guide their policy and resource development for diabetes and South Asian cultures.

Nutrition counsellors / health care workers can use this research when developing new diabetes counselling tools for the South Asian community.

What you need to know:
A Canadian Diabetes Association tool for educating diabetics was evaluated specifically for South Asians. Diet resources for South Asians have been created from the findings of this study and can be accessed at http://www.diabetes.ca/for-professionals/resources/nutrition/tools/

South Asian with diabetes & their families can use this information to help better understand their cultural needs related to diabetes.

What did the researchers do?
The researchers did two sets of focus group discussions. One group discussion was with South Asian dietitians who worked with South Asian clients. To study the views of the patients, five group discussions with adults of South Asian origin were done. Participants were mainly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India. South Asians with or without diabetes participated in the discussions. The groups discussed the Canadian Diabetes Association’s teaching tool as well as eating patterns and South Asian culture.
What did the researchers find?

Suggestions to make the Canadian Diabetes Association’s tool more culturally relevant included: the use of food pictures and colour, and use of South Asian languages and English in the tool. The main languages that resources should use are Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, Punjabi, and Gujarati. To explain portion sizes, participants preferred a model using plate division better than a method that used size comparison to the hands.

South Asian diet & culture

Since being in Canada, South Asian immigrants said they ate fewer meals a day but ate larger portions and more calories per day. Lack of time was the biggest reason for this change. Measuring portions or planning how much to eat, a key skill in managing diet in diabetes, was not common among participants. Many participants preferred cultural foods or a combination of both cultural foods and Canadian foods. Dinnertime was the most common time to eat cultural foods.

Managing Diabetes

Dietitians reported individual counselling of patients was more common. They thought this was more effective. Things that made educating diabetics difficult for dietitians included: client’s lack of time, financial issues, access to diabetes services and cultural views. South Asians thought it was important to include a spouse and/or the family cook in diet education. Families of diabetics often adjust what they eat and when they eat meals to support the person with diabetes. This was more true when it was a male family member with diabetes. The researchers found that holidays and traditions of South Asians can make managing diabetes more difficult. Eating sweets, late evening buffets, and managing diabetes while fasting were of concern.

About the Researchers:

Dr. Paula Brauer is an Associate Professor in the Family Relations & Applied Nutrition Department at the University of Guelph. Dr. Brauer can be reached at pbrauer@uoguelph.ca


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