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South Asians at a higher risk of developing chronic conditions

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FRIDAY, 22 AUGUST 2008 FRANCO CIGNELLI



In today's society, chances are you know someone who has diabetes or high blood pressure. What you may be surprised to learn is that these chronic conditions are more prevalent in Canadians of South Asian origin than in the general population.

Canadians of South Asian origin are three times more likely to suffer from high blood pressure than East Asians or Caucasians, and they are more likely to develop the condition at a younger age. South Asian Canadians are also more likely to have type 2 diabetes.

"Over one in five patients in our practice have either diabetes or an associated condition that increases their chances of developing a heart attack or stroke or blocked arteries prematurely," says Dr. Bob Bernstein, Lead Physician of the Bridgepoint Family Health Team, which opened this spring in Toronto's Riverdale community. "That's a lot of people! And a lot of disabling illness! Early treatment by a team of health professionals like we have in our Family Health Team can prevent or delay the onset of these illnesses and prevent or delay disability."

The Family Health Team is part of Bridgepoint Health, a rehabilitation centre that specializes in patients who have multiple chronic conditions, also known as Complex Chronic Disease. The Bridgepoint Family Health Team offers community-based primary care that focuses on preventing and managing chronic illness.

Although there is a genetic connection for the increased risk amongst South Asian Canadians, controllable factors such as diet and exercise play a large role too.

"Lifestyle changes such as modifying your diet and increasing your activity can help prevent or control diabetes or high blood pressure," say Catherine O'Halloran, Bridgepoint Family Health Team's dietitian. "Increasing your intake of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low fat dairy products is an initial change people can make."

Untreated high blood pressure and diabetes lead to other chronic illnesses, including stroke, kidney disease, blindness and heart disease.

Many people with high blood pressure and diabetes are unaware that they are unwell, and therefore regular visits to their family physician are critical to prevent further illness.

In Canada, chronic illness has reached overwhelming proportions; 16 million Canadians have at least one chronic disease. One in seven Canadians has one or more chronic illness. As a result of these numbers, chronic disease needs to become a top health care priority.

As we learn more about the people living with chronic disease, we are learning more about how to treat this growing patient population. Today we know that people with chronic disease are managing their conditions on their own. We also know their diseases are long-term and are rarely cured. And we are learning that these and other factors related to chronic disease require the healthcare community to work with patients as full partners in their care.

Complex Chronic Disease affects a growing number of Canadians, and Bridgepoint Health is taking a leading role in this new frontier of medicine.

Bridgepoint recently launched a public awareness campaign that capitalizes on the theme of "a new disease out there" by creatively combining the names of several common chronic diseases to draw attention to the current reality. To date more than three million Canadians have been exposed to Bridgepoint's campaign elements.

Through public campaigns like this Bridgepoint Health is spreading awareness about the prevalence of this health care challenge, and the need for the health community to rally behind this new disease paradigm.

For the many South Asian Canadians living with chronic disease(s), there are several resources available to help

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manage their conditions.

For more information on Chronic Disease visit www.bridgepointhealth.ca and www.lifechanges.ca

Bridgepoint Health is a publicly funded healthcare organization, in Toronto, that provides patient care, research and teaching in the specialized field of Complex Chronic Disease prevention and management – the biggest healthcare challenge of the 21st century. Affiliated with the University of Toronto, the Bridgepoint Health network includes Bridgepoint Hospital, Bridgepoint Family Health Team, the Bridgepoint Centre for Research, Education and Policy, and the Bridgepoint Health Foundation.

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