

A Guide to Managing Your Health

Asian Indian American Older Adults



As an older Asian Indian American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born in the United States (U.S.) or came from another country. You may have higher risks for some diseases because of your genetics, health habits, how the healthcare system treats you, your environment, or immigration status. Health concerns include heart disease and stroke, obesity, cancer, and mental or cognitive issues.

When you visit your healthcare professional, let them know about your health needs, cultural beliefs and practices, and questions you may have. Your healthcare professionals need to know this information because they want to give you good care and keep you as healthy as possible.

We will discuss some high-risk diseases among Asian Indian Americans, and tips to talk with your healthcare professional about your health.

Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Asian Indian Americans

Cancer

Cancer is a leading cause of death among the Asian Indian ethnic subgroup. Prostate, lung, and colorectal cancers are most common among Asian Indian men, while breast, gynecologic, and colorectal cancers are common in women.

Discovering cancer early leads to better results. So:

- Discuss new symptoms with your healthcare professional. If you don't, cancer can be harder to find and treat.
- Make an appointment with your healthcare professional quickly if you experience any of the following: feeling a lump in your breast; developing new shortness of breath, a long-lasting cough, or

coughing up blood; or finding blood in your urine or feces.

- Ask your healthcare professional to screen for cancer so it can be found earlier.

Various lifestyle factors have been linked to developing cancer. Leading a healthy lifestyle can be effective in reducing the risk of cancer. Healthy lifestyle changes include components such as avoiding harmful environments or taking precautions with environmental hazards, avoiding alcohol, stopping smoking, eating a diet low in salt and fat, stress management, routine exercise, and eating nutrient dense whole foods including variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, whole nuts, seeds, and legumes.

Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar levels and leads to other health problems, including damage to your eyes, kidneys, and heart. Diabetes can get worse if you eat unhealthy food, do little exercise, or are overweight or obese.

Talk with your healthcare professional about how to eat healthily, exercise, and take the medications you may need. Some tips include:

- Decrease or stop simple carbohydrates in your diet, such as those made from refined flour or refined grains like white rice or regular pasta. Look for food with complex carbohydrates, which is more nutritious and doesn't increase blood sugar quickly.
- Increase whole or unprocessed or minimally processed foods in your diet. Stop ultra processed foods, which have been linked to diabetes.
- Eat more vegetables and low calorie foods.
- Drink water (preferred) or sugar-free beverages, instead of sugary beverages.
- Increase your exercise. It is recommended to exercise for 30 minutes per day, five days a week, but any amount of physical activity is good for your health.

Your healthcare professional will check your blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, and kidney function. You need to check your feet daily and report any skin problems to your healthcare professional immediately. You need to have your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years.

Heart Disease and Stroke

Your risk of having a heart attack or stroke is higher if you have high blood pressure, heart failure, diabetes, obesity, smoking, and do little physical activity. Also, having South Asian ancestry raises your risk of having cardiovascular disease.

Eating foods low in fat and salt is important. So is eating lots of fruits and vegetables and limiting meat and sweets. Limit the alcohol you drink to one drink per day for women and two for men.

Other things can reduce your risks. These include getting daily exercise, quitting smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking recommended medications.

Be aware of immediate risks to your health.

- If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. If so, you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.
- Strokes happen when the brain's blood supply is blocked or stopped. Brain cells can die within minutes. If you have trouble speaking, weakness on one side of your body, severe headache, or loss of vision or balance you need to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Mental and Cognitive Health

Mental and cognitive health are significant concerns among older person of Asian Indian backgrounds. It is very important to talk to your health care provider about concerns you may have about your mental health, including forgetfulness. Often people do not talk about mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia, but they all have significant implications for your quality of life. Your health care team can screen for depression, anxiety, and look into reversible causes of sleep disturbance.

Additionally, cognitive impairment is a growing concern of older adults across all cultural backgrounds. Cognitive impairment not only includes forgetfulness but may also exhibit as difficulty doing routine chores, getting lost, and missing medications, among other challenges. Your health care provider can screen for any concerns with cognitive impairment and also discuss what is normal and what is not normal with aging.

Loneliness and infrequent social contacts have been linked both with cognitive health and mental health. A healthy diet, continuous learning, physical exercise, and managing depression and stress are beneficial for mental health, but it is also very important to encourage social interactions and address loneliness and isolation. Often Area Agencies in Aging in your area have various programs to support older adults, including senior companion program. Your health care team can connect with your community resources to help you have a healthy social life.

Obesity

Eating more food than your body needs can make you overweight or obese. If you eat foods that are high in fat and sugar, or drink sugary drinks, you can gain weight. Getting little exercise and having sleep problems can also cause you to gain weight.

Being overweight or obese can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, heart disease, sleep apnea (problems with breathing during sleep), and even cancer. Obesity can also make breathing worse and cause more arthritis pain and problems with walking.

Talk to your healthcare professional about ways to lose weight and improve your fitness and quality of life. Some ways to lose weight include:

- Stop eating unhealthy food and eat more fruits and vegetables. Decrease how much you eat by 500 calories each day. A dietitian (a person trained in healthy nutrition) can evaluate what you usually eat and help you create a healthier diet.
- Walk or do a similar type of exercise for 30 minutes a day most days. Resistance exercises such as lifting weights are important to avoid losing muscle as you age.
- Get help by joining a Silver Sneakers exercise program. Some insurance programs will pay for it. Or, see a physical therapist who can create a good exercise plan with you. Free exercise videos can be found on the internet. They can help you create an exercise program at home.

Preventive Health

Preventing or discovering disease early can limit damage to your body. Seeing your healthcare professional at least once a year will help you discover diseases early so that they are easier to treat and you have better results.

Your healthcare professional will discuss preventive healthcare with you. For example:

- Cancer screenings are important. Some common screening tests are mammograms, prostate exams, and colonoscopies.

- Vaccinations, including flu, pneumonia, shingles, and COVID-19 shots, can prevent serious infections. If you are concerned about getting vaccinations, ask your healthcare professional for more information.

- Let your healthcare professional and pharmacists know if you take home remedies, herbs, vitamins, or supplements. These professionals can help make sure these remedies are safe with your other medications and treatments.

Tobacco Use

Smoking causes health problems:

- Tobacco has chemicals that are bad for your health. They can cause cancer, lung disease, high blood pressure, and strokes.

- E-cigarettes (vaping) and smokeless tobacco (chewing gum, snuff tobacco) also cause serious health problems.

- Your family and friends breathe in your smoke and can get health problems from second-hand smoke. For example, children who live with people who smoke can develop asthma.

Older adults who quit can improve their health.

However, it can be hard to stop. Get help by:

- Talking with your healthcare professional about ways to quit smoking.

- Calling 1-800-QUIT-NOW. It is a toll-free number operated by the National Cancer Institute that will connect you directly to your state's tobacco quit line support system.

- Taking medications that can help you stop smoking.

Communicating With Your Healthcare Team

Your healthcare team can include physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, nursing assistants, social workers, pharmacists, therapists, and others. Each team member has special training to help you in different ways.

Your healthcare team will want to know about you, your culture, and what is important to you! You will receive the best care by sharing your cultural beliefs and health care practices. These beliefs and practices can affect your health and healthcare treatments. See the Tip Sheet on Cultural Considerations when Communicating with Your Healthcare Team for helpful suggestions.

Note that if you have immigrated to the United States, your immigration history may be an important part of your personal story. If your healthcare professional knows your history, that will let them know if you have an increased risk of diseases that are common in other countries. It will also help your healthcare professional to know how much access you had to health care before coming to the United States. This information can be sensitive, but we encourage you to share this with your healthcare professional.

**We hope this information has been helpful to you.
Be sure to let your healthcare providers know if you
or your family members have any questions.**



40 FULTON STREET
SUITE 809
NEW YORK, NY 10038
212.308.1414 TEL

Info@healthinaging.org
www.healthinaging.org

The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

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