

## A Guide to Managing Your Health

### Pakistani American Older Adults



**A**s a Pakistani American person, this resource is for you, whether you were born in the US or came from Pakistan.

You may have higher risks for some diseases because of your genetics, health habits, immigration and cultural adaptation, how the healthcare system treats you, or your environment.

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 because they want to give you good care and keep you as healthy as possible.

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

### Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Pakistani Americans

#### 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 have a sedentary lifestyle.

To reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, increase whole grains, beans, legumes, vegetables and fruits in your diet. Minimize sources of saturated fat such as meat, eggs. Limit processed and ultra processed foods. Avoid or limit alcohol.

Other things can reduce your risks. These include getting daily exercise, quitting smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking recommended medications. Talk to your healthcare professional about how to reduce your risks and follow their advice.

#### 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.

## 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 simple and processed carbohydrates in your diet, such as white bread and pasta. Focus instead on complex carbohydrate or whole grains in moderation.
- Eat more vegetables and low-calorie foods
- Drink water (preferred) or sugar-free beverages instead of sugary beverages
- Increase your exercise to 30 minutes per day, five days a week

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 your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years.

## Obesity

Obesity has multiple possible known and unknown causes. Eating more food than your body needs can contribute to overweight or obesity. If you eat foods that are high in fat and sugar, or drink sugary drinks, you can gain weight. Also, frequent snacking and meals can lead to an abnormal response in your body's metabolism response and contribute to obesity. 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 nutrient-dense whole foods such as whole grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables. 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.

## Tobacco and Marijuana 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.
- Marijuana can cause the heart to beat faster and increases blood pressure.
- 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.

## Cancer

Pakistani American adults have a higher risk of liver cancer, because they have higher rates of hepatitis C and hepatitis B than the general population. Along with these risks come higher risks of having colon and lung cancer. Immigrant Pakistani American women have a high risk of breast cancer. Immigrant Pakistani American men have a high risk of prostate cancer.

Discovering cancer early leads to better results. So:

- Discuss new symptoms with your healthcare provider. If you don't, cancer can be harder to find and treat.
- Make an appointment with your healthcare provider 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 provider to screen for cancer so it can be found earlier.

Avoiding alcohol, stopping smoking, and eating a diet low in salt and fat can decrease your risk of getting cancer. So can exercise and having a healthy diet full of fruits and vegetables.

## Depression and Mental Illness

Getting older doesn't always lead to depression or severe sadness. These conditions can be caused by chemical imbalances in your brain.

Depression is a serious health condition and can lead to other health problems. Symptoms of depression can include:

- Feeling sad, tired, or irritable
  - Lacking interest in hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
  - Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too long
  - Having a poor appetite
  - Being confused or having problems with thinking.
- These symptoms can appear to be dementia.

If you have symptoms of depression or have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, talk to your healthcare professional as soon as you can. They can recommend counseling and medications.

Family members and friends can support you when you are depressed.

Sometimes shame prevents Pakistani Americans from getting mental health care. However, depression is a disease that needs treatment. Medications and behavior therapy can help.

## Infections

Tuberculosis is an infection that spreads easily through the air. Serious symptoms include coughing blood, losing weight without trying, or sweating so much at night that you need to change your clothes or sheets. You need to report symptoms like these to your healthcare professional right away.

Tuberculosis is widespread in Pakistan. So, immigrants of Pakistani American background may have been exposed to or treated for tuberculosis. They can be at a high risk for developing a tuberculosis infection. If you or someone you know is experiencing fever and persistent cough, night sweats, or unintentional weight loss for a few weeks, please seek medical care.

Let your health care professional know if you have ever been diagnosed, treated, or been vaccinated for tuberculosis. They may need to offer you treatment.

Other common infections in Pakistan are typhoid, cholera, dengue hemorrhagic fever, and malaria. If you are traveling back from Pakistan and are experiencing unusual illness, please get health care quickly. The symptoms may include diarrhea, fever, abdominal pain, feeling unwell, or extreme tiredness.

## Medications

Many older adults coming from Pakistan buy medications without a prescription off the shelf. These medications may include antibiotics. In addition, some older adults may also take herbal and homeopathic medications, which can interact with prescription medications.

Tell your healthcare professionals if you take any medications purchased from another country, or if you take homeopathic or herbal medications, home remedies, vitamins, or supplements. Your healthcare professional will help make sure these therapies are safe to take with your prescribed medications and treatments.

## 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 find out about 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 to take with your other medications and treatments.

## 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. You may wish to look for a healthcare professional with a South Asian background if that would help in communication. Otherwise, medical interpreters may be available.

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. Knowing your history will help your healthcare professional to know about increased risk of diseases for people who have come from Pakistan. So will knowing 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.**



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*DISCLAIMER:* This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. June 2025

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