

Sick from immigration? You're not alone

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Syed Kamal, could barely believe what he was hearing from his doctor: like all legal immigrants, Syed, his wife and young son passed a doctor's examination before arriving in Canada. But according to his physician, Syed had now developed high blood pressure, high sugar and borderline high cholesterol in just six months after getting off the plane. Why? Because of unanticipated weight gain and stress during the settlement phase.

Recently arrived immigrants often develop chronic diseases within a short time after arriving in Canada. They do not realize the toll that dealing with stressful settlement issues can take on their health. The good news is that much of this can be averted with awareness and a few preventive steps.

Initially, newly arrived immigrants are in better health than the Canadian-born population" according to Statistics Canada's study based on following initially healthy individuals across timelines to track their health conditions. The study found, over time, immigrants became more likely than Canadian-born to "report a shift towards fair or poor health".

But not all immigrants fare the same; it's the recent non-European immigrants who face the greatest risk. They're "twice as likely as Canadian-born to report deterioration in their health." Because three out of four recent immigrants are from non-European countries, chronic diseases could impact hundreds of thousands of people.

Dr. S. Mehta, a family physician in Toronto with nearly thirty years in practice, agrees. Many of his recent immigrant patients are from South Asia. They have symptoms of chronic diseases. Smoking is not the culprit because the same study found recent non-European immigrants were less likely than the Canadian-born to become daily smokers.

Dr. Mehta thinks it's diet and lack of exercise. By diet he means eating both "more food" and "fast food and fried food". As a new immigrant himself, Syed agrees that food choices played a part in his weight gain: "Fast foods were attractive; less expensive but filling".

Syed gained about seven pounds within a few months after arriving in Canada.

Recent non-European immigrants are far more likely to gain weight. Food choices contribute to increased body weight of recent non-European immigrants. The same study noted, this subset of immigrants were "almost twice as likely as Canadian-born population to have experienced at least a 10% increase in their BMI". BMI or Body Mass Index roughly measures a person's body fatness through a formula using an individual's weight and height.

Nearly all immigrants face stressful situations during the settlement process. "Stress will aggravate poor health especially high blood pressure," says Dr. Mehta. Most new immigrants' energies are spent in the settlement process of finding employment and adjusting to a new country and climate. "Finding a proper job—that's mental stress!" says Syed Kamal.

The settlement phase for new immigrants takes up significant time and energy; leaving precious little for improving one's health through better food choices, exercise and stress management. This phase of adjusting to a new life is faced by all new immigrants, European and non-Europeans alike. But with recent non-European immigrants' significant weight gain, the potential for chronic diseases increases for them.

But this is not a hopeless situation. Early detection of declining health is important because measures can be taken to reverse the situation. Case in point: upon detection of chronic disease symptoms, Syed lost 15 pounds through diet control, walking and stress management. This in turn lowered his blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol within normal range. As a new immigrant, ask for a check-up from your family physician every year; there's no out-of-pocket cost to you.

Achieving or maintaining one's ideal body weight seems to lower the probability of chronic diseases. Use a basic weight scale to monitor your weight; once-a-week is fine. Follow your doctor's advice on the ideal weight range for you. If you need to lose weight, look for ways to cut calories in your diet without going hungry. Health

Canada's web site <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/> offers guides on daily food and nutrition requirements.

Your partner is an important ally when it comes to cutting calories in your diet. Syed Kamal credits his wife for using less oil in cooking and cooking more vegetables. This helped him cut calories in his diet. Exercise is also important, but it does not mean you need a gym membership. Exercise can be something as simple as a brisk walk, taking the stairs or doing some extra house work.

Take a mental break from stress; re-evaluate all the positive things in your life. If you feel the stress is unmanageable, speak to your doctor for advice.

"Health is wealth" is an old proverb. As a recent immigrant, Syed Kamal agrees.

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