

**“Silent Killers: Diabetes and Heart Disease- the Indian curse?”**  
**Outline of Presentation by S. Jay Jayasankar, MD**  
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We, Indian Americans, who often pride in our “healthy” vegetarian diet, might be deluding ourselves. Diabetes, heart disease, some cancers and other conditions are more prevalent and wiping out young lives, it seems ever increasingly younger. Racial and ethnic disparities in health status and care are real and serious. Eliminating this is a high priority for the US Department of Health and Human Services.

Ours is one of the fastest growing populations and has more than doubled in the decade between the census reaching over 1.6 million in 2000. We are culturally, genetically and in many other ways distinct from the East Asian population and hence the larger grouping of Asian American serves only certain purposes.

Besides nature, nurture plays an important role in the disparities through culture, health habits and behavior as well as our own constructs and of those around us, including stereotyping. The latter includes the title of “model minority” which myth makes remedial efforts more uphill.

Education and understanding are the most fundamental keys – we need to raise awareness among physicians, insurance companies, policy-makers and others, and last but not the least, our youngsters. Most of the conditions can be prevented or mitigated by appropriate behavioral change.

Disease burdens vary and surveillance thresholds and indicators need to be modified. Even some treatment choices and stratification require understanding. It is important to sensitize ourselves and our physicians and care givers to these cultural subtleties and the scientific nuances.

Our community is not all well to do or educated. Health literacy is even more variable. And the fact that we have a very high proportion of physicians amongst us does not make us or even those physicians any less vulnerable.

There is clearly a need for more research in these areas on Indian Americans but that is no reason to defer culturally effective education in nutrition, habits as well as disease prevention and management. Indeed there is a burning urgency and each of us carries a responsibility to ourselves, our families, and those we care for.

Diabetes, heart disease, some forms of cancer and domestic violence would be discussed as examples of variations in disease prevalence and characteristics, as also people behaviors, habits, screening standards and prevention approaches.