

## Frequently Asked Questions - myths and misconceptions

*Dr Shirine Boardman, consultant diabetologist at Warwick Hospital answers some of the frequently asked questions patients ask at diabetes clinics.*

- 1. I feel tired all the time, and am vegetarian, is it because of my diet?**
  - a. Iron deficiency is very common in the Asian community.
  - b. Women are particularly at risk because of periods.
  - c. Symptoms include tiredness, hair loss, weak nails, breathlessness, aching.
  - d. If you don't eat red meat, and your green vegetables are overcooked, you could become iron deficient.
  - e. Also tea and chapattis can hinder the absorption of iron.
  - f. Lots of fresh green vegetables can help, reduce tea consumption or take iron supplements.
  
- 2. My aunt had a heart problem recently, we are all vegetarian and eat lots of vegetables and fruits. Why the heart problem?**
  - a. South Asians appear to have a genetic predisposition to heart disease.
  - b. Many vegetarians still consume too much salt, oily foods and sugar, which can lead to problems.
  - c. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking and diabetes are all risk factors and must be treated to prevent heart problems.
  
- 3. My husband has a sweet tooth and says his grandfather who lived in Punjab till the ripe old age of 90 had three teaspoons of sugar with his tea and enjoyed ghee with not a sign of diabetes or heart problems. Can this be true?**
  - a. Lifestyles in Indian villages were very different to conditions here. They had to walk miles and work hard in the fields in hot weather, which helped to burn lots of calories and sweat off the salt.
  - b. In Britain, the cold weather stops us from going out and doing the same, and the same diet will lead to serious health problems.
  - c. Some people are very lucky. They do not have a healthy lifestyle, and do not get ill. Most people with unhealthy lifestyles however will get some problems. As we cannot find out who will be lucky in health, we should all follow as healthy a lifestyle as possible.
  
- 4. Is it safe to have sweeteners? And what about diabetic chocolates?**
  - a. Sweeteners are safe provided we don't consume too much.
  - b. Diabetic chocolates still have a lot of fat in them and contain some sugar so are not 'safe' to eat freely.
  - c. Dark chocolates have less fat and sugar, so a couple of squares a day will not cause any harm.
  
- 5. I have suffered with aches and pains all over for some time and the doctor just says it is 'old age' but I am still young. Is there anything I can do with my diet to help?**
  - a. Vitamin D deficiency is very common in south Asians and particularly severe in the winter and when most of the body is covered up.
  - b. Aches and pains are common in south Asian communities because of low Vitamin D, due to the lack of exposure to sunlight. Darker skin finds it particularly difficult to make Vitamin D, and it can be solved by exposure to sunlight for 20 mins/day.

- 6. I have been told that chapattis could be bad for your health, and I should eat English bread instead, is this true?**
- Chapattis is an unleavened bread with phytate (roughage) and can make iron absorption more difficult. Too many may hinder absorption of these vitamins.
- 7. My nephew can become very badly behaved and won't sit still at times and his mother finds it very hard, can it be related to diet at all?**
- Some children's behaviour is affected by the foods they eat.
  - Paediatricians describe 'sugar rushes' as a cause of unruly behaviour in children when too many sweets are eaten.
  - In the past colourings and E-numbers found in sweets have also been recognised.
  - Some children improve when they are given supplements of fish oils.
  - A healthy diet can improve your child's concentration, behaviour and development.
- 8. My daughter doesn't like to eat her vegetables... how can I encourage her to change?**
- Include several types /portions of vegetables in the food that she enjoys.
  - Leave cut up raw vegetables freely available to eat as a snack when hungry such as carrots or cucumber.
  - Consider playing with colourful cut raw vegetables at meal times on the plate and encourage your child to taste these vegetables afterwards.
  - When you go shopping, let your daughter choose the vegetables to eat at that night's meal.
- 9. I am diabetic and my nurse has recently told me that bananas are bad and I must be careful about potatoes.**
- Tropical fruits and root vegetables such as potatoes (when cooked) can release sugar very rapidly when eaten. It has previously been thought that starchy foods such as potatoes raise blood sugar gently and sugar from fruits are safe. However it has now been recognised that this is not always true and jacket potatoes are particularly able to raise sugar levels, as are fruit juices.
  - New potatoes or sweet potatoes and temperate fruit eaten whole are less likely to raise sugar levels.
  - You also need to be careful how much of these foods you eat. A big banana or a large potato will put your sugar levels up more than smaller ones.
- 10. I get bad tummy pains when I eat and my doctor has done lots of tests and says nothing is wrong and has diagnosed 'irritable bowel', can it be diet related?**
- South Asians are particularly at risk of being sensitive to 'lactose'(milk). A trial of soya milk may help to solve the 'irritable tummy'.
  - If this does not work, there are other foods that you eat that may cause problems. Ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian.