BMM Uttar Rang conference - Grand Rapids, MI

Important Medical Considerations for Older South Asian Adults

**Q1: What are the serious medical issues that face South Asians as I prepare for and enter the retired stage of my life, and what symptoms should I look for?**

* + - * Major heart and vascular disease (to the heart, brain and legs): includes coronary heart disease (causing angina and heart attacks), carotid artery obstruction (causing mini and major strokes), peripheral vascular obstruction. *Symptoms: shortness of breath, chest tightness or pain, arm/jaw pain, leg pain-usually all with exertion. For warnings of stroke think* ***FAST*** *(****F****ace dropping,* ***A****rm weakness,* ***S****peech difficulty,* ***T****ime to call 911).*
      * Diabetes and its complications: this is typically adult-onset, sometimes requiring insulin. Complications include vision problems, kidney failure, heart and vascular disease (see above), and neuropathy. *Symptoms: unexplained weight loss with frequent urination, burning or tingling in hands/feet, usually* ***no*** *symptoms.*
      * Lung disease: includes asthma (especially for those with allergies or skin eczema) or emphysema (for those with a history of smoking). *Symptoms: shortness of breath or coughing, especially with exertion or at night, sometimes timed with certain seasons.*
      * Cancer: includes the major cancers in all adults (lung, colon), those in men (prostate), and those in women (breast, uterine). Of note, South Asians are also at risk of oral cancer because of chewing tobacco, supari (betel nut), and paan. *Symptoms: unexplained weight loss and fatigue (all), poor appetite (all), bleeding in stool (colon), coughing up blood or shortness of breath (lung), abnormal vaginal bleeding after menopause (uterine), non-healing mouth sores (oral). Breast and prostate usually do* ***not*** *have symptoms and need screening to detect. Screening is also helpful for colon cancer (colonoscopy every 10 years after age 50) and lung cancer (for heavy smokers).*

**Q2: What are the other medical issues (besides the ones listed above) that may affect how I function during these years of my life?**

* + - * Arthritic conditions (such as degenerative joint disease) involving the spine, hip, knees, shoulders and hands. *Symptoms: pain, inflammation, reduced movement.*
      * Osteoporosis (hip, spine and wrists). *Symptoms: usually no symptoms unless fracture. Screening can be helpful with regular bone densitometry (esp. women)*
      * Prostate enlargement (men). *Symptoms: frequent urination (especially at night), poor urinary stream, difficulty initiating urinary stream.*
      * Sexual dysfunction (men and women). *Symptoms: poor libido, difficulty with arousal (all). Men: difficulty obtaining/maintaining an erection. Women: pain with intercourse.*
      * Dementia and milder forms of memory loss or cognitive problems. *Symptoms: difficulty with memory (usually short-term), confusion at times, difficulty with concentration.*
      * Mental illness – including both depression and anxiety. *Symptoms: change in mood, agitation, insomnia, reduced appetite and energy, excessive guilt, poor concentration, mind racing, social isolation, thoughts of hurting oneself (severe).*

**Q3: What can I do to prevent these conditions?**

***Nature and Nurture*** - First and foremost, it is important to understand that reasons for most illness include both things you *cannot do anything about* (genetics) and things you can *try to control* (environment and personal health).

***Prevention*** – be measured, but not obsessive. It’s still OK to enjoy! **STAND** up for yourself…

* + - * **Screen**: Not just regular screening tests (colonoscopy, mammography), but also vaccinations (flu shot every year, pneumovax twice in your life, prevnar once, tetanus every 10 years).
      * **Team**: See your primary physician regularly (and any specialists that are part of your team). Think of your PCP as the *quarterback* of your care: he/she should know everything that is going on, coordinate your care, and be there to answer questions and help you make decisions. This includes when you travel, or if you have a second home (rule of thumb…if you have a second place, get a second doctor).
      * **Activity**: *A small amount of regular activity every day* is better than large amounts less frequently. *Activity should focus on physical, intellectual, and social.* All three are important for long-term health.
      * **Numbers**: *Blood pressure* and *cholesterol* control are two of the most important risk factors you can control. *If you need medications, find out which ones they are, and take them regularly.*
      * **Diet**: Try to limit added salt, get adequate Calcium (2 Tums-ES twice a day) and vitamin D (800 iU per day), have daily fiber (healthy Indian food daily is usually enough, but you can add 1 Metamucil biscuit every day), baby aspirin (81 mg) if you are allowed. *Do NOT “over-vitaminize”.*

**Q4: How do I adjust to my health and how it affects me and others?**

Health and illness can affect your functional status, your physical and mental well-being. This can cause issues with spousal, children, and caregiver stress. Suggestion – **Don’t wait…**

* + - * Don’t wait: *Pay attention to your symptoms and seek care.*
      * Don’t wait: *Discuss your views and wishes with your loved ones, including what you think of independent living.*
      * Don’t wait: *Declare your Medical Care Power of Attorney.*
      * Don’t wait: *Put together an Advanced Healthcare Directive.*

***Good reference:*** <http://www.webmd.com/palliative-care/advance-directives-medical-power-attorney#1>