



The Navhind Times

How a diet change can save the planet

A diabetes reversal expert, author and trainer, Dr. Nandita Shah founded SHARAN to help people prevent and reverse lifestyle diseases through lifestyle changes rather than medicines. She discusses veganism with NT NETWORK



Dr. Nandita Shah

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As a doctor and a graduate of the CMP Homeopathic Medical College in Mumbai, your journey in the medical field has been nothing short of fascinating. Can you share your story before SHARAN?

Although I got admission into a regular medical college, I chose homeopathy as I had decided right from the beginning that I did not want to treat a patient with chemical doses. Because homeopathy treats the mind and body and the connection between the two, it was the ideal choice for me. I was happy in my chosen field and used to travel all over the world teaching and speaking about this ancient practice. However 20 years down the line, I realised that medicines alone do not cure permanently, they only give temporary relief or cure the symptoms not the root cause. I am not saying that medicines are not required, in fact I would say we should be grateful as they can be life-saving. However, medicines are over-used.

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Also in 1997, I suffered from Guillain Barre, an acute auto-immune disease, where there is complete paralysis of the body that starts from the feet and then moves upward. It was extremely serious and I could not even turn in my bed and needed help with everything. I was recommended hospitalisation but decided against it as I wanted to heal without the use of any modern medical treatment. My father was extremely supportive and with help at home, I was able to manage. It was a long and difficult journey but led to personal and professional growth which taught me at a very personal level about health and healing. After experiencing changes through a whole plant-based diet in my own health and that of several serious patients, it became clear that treating with only good, healthy food was not only faster and more consistent in reversing diseases than homeopathy, but also less subjective.

In addition, I moved to Aurville in Tamil Nadu, away from the stress which is a cause of many diseases and closer to nature, which was a part of my healing journey.

You were brought up a vegetarian but turned vegan in 1983. What led to this switch and how did SHARAN (Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature) come about more than a decade later?

As a vegetarian, I thought I was not causing harm to any living being. Also, I had become a doctor to reduce suffering. But when I became aware of the tremendous suffering that we inflict on fellow creatures used for food, I had to make the connection. For example, when I realised that for us to consume milk,

a cow has to be artificially inseminated and her calf is taken away from her, who is the rightful owner of that milk, I was shocked. It made me rethink and I stopped consuming all dairy products.

I always thought that as a vegetarian, milk is essential as a rich source of calcium and protein but just after I left milk, I came across articles in medical journals that clearly explained how milk could be harmful. While researching on the matter, I also read that dairy is a major cause of osteoporosis. Now, this is scientific evidence and I also had my own personal evidence which I collected while teaching overseas. On my trips abroad, I noticed osteoporosis was much higher than in India because in the west milk consumption was very high. At the time, India did not consume the quantity of milk it does today; paneer and cheese were considered special items.

Around this time while I was in New York, I came across a book by Dr. John McDougall which explained how we could become healthy and lose weight by following a whole food plant-based diet. He had suffered from a stroke right after graduating from medical school and he recognised the importance of an Asian diet in preventing and curing diseases. Another doctor who was at the time doing some exceptional work in reversing diabetes was Neal Barnard. I met with him in Washington and invited him as a speaker to India. He spoke in several medical colleges and even to lay people and what I noticed was that lay people were more open to adopt his teachings to get better but the doctors were more resistant. By this time, I too started conducting seminars on general health using vegetables to heal and I started seeing amazing results. During the whole-day seminars, I used to serve whole food plant-based dishes so par-



ticipants got a taste of what it entailed. Of course it was difficult for some patients to make the required changes as we all do not like changes.

At present, we conduct a 21-day diabetes reversal retreat at SHARAN so participants can experience first-hand what the diet includes and experience the benefits of switching to this diet. At the beginning of the retreat, participants have to do all the tests and the same at the end of 21 days to see the difference. Besides the diet, the programme includes yoga, meditation, counselling, swimming, art therapy, knowledge sessions, etcetera.

SHARAN came about after all my experiences as well as my encounters with people who helped me on my journey.

You have said there is a difference in 99% plant-based and 100% plant-based diets. Why does such a small quantity make a difference?

When I recovered from my Guillain Barre, I used to occasionally consume some dairy products especially when visiting family or friends. But when a friend one day visited me and refused the buttered toffees I had offered him, it made me realise that I too could choose to consume a 100% plant-based diet. After this conscious decision, I immediately saw the difference in my health which improved by leaps and bounds. The occasional coughs, fevers and painful periods disappeared. There was a quantum shift in my health and it was incredible.

Around the world, the number of people who follow a vegan diet is growing exponentially. However there are common misconceptions about this diet. What are the most common myths in your opinion? Firstly, we have all been brought up believing we are omnivores and hence can eat everything. This is not true. For example, if we are in an orchard and see a fruit on a tree, our instinct is to pluck it and eat it. Do we feel the same if we see a chicken or goat walk by, do we salivate? No, we don't! Like a true omnivore, we cannot pounce on it, tear it apart and eat it whole or raw like a dog or tiger. This clearly shows we are not omnivores.

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So why do vegetarians as well as non-vegetarians get the same diseases, is an important question. The reason is milk; since milk and meat have the same properties, high protein, high fat and no fibre. Animal milk is not naturally our food as mammals produce milk only for their young ones not for another species. Babies instinctively love their mother's milk and when you give them any other milk in its natural state they will not have it. Mothers then have to sweeten it or add products to make it palatable.

Putting the wrong foods in our bodies is like putting diesel in a petrol car, and is bound to cause problems.



Receiving the Nari Shakti Puraskar in 2016

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The other most common misconception is that a plant-based diet is lacking in protein which we need especially for muscles and growth and repair and that animal protein is the only source of good proteins and essential amino acids. But this is so far from the truth. Look at horses and elephants who are herbivores; where do they get their proteins from? Plants right? We should also keep in mind that excess proteins can cause many diseases like gout, chronic kidney issues, acidity, and even cancers.

In a busy world like ours, changing our food habits or switching to a plant-based diet is not very easy or convenient. Can you share a few tips to make this transition easier and sustain it? Before jumping into anything, it is important to do proper research. Suddenly changing our diet can easily lead to going back to our old diet due to conditioning and even addiction. There are certain foods that are very addictive like sugar, milk, tea, coffee, fried foods, etcetera and it is a fact that we are addicted to these foods. Take for example flavoured chips, not only is it a fried food but it also has additives and even milk powder. When we open a packet of chips, it is hard to put it down. Hence to wean ourselves from these foods we have to go through the process and recognise that we are addicts to these foods. There will surely be withdrawal symptoms but we have to stay focussed on our objective for changing the diet. If we look after our vehicles and don't put the wrong fuel in them, why should we put the wrong foods in our bodies?

Milk is believed to be nature's perfect food and infants who have just been weaned from their mother's milk are switched immediately to cow's milk. On a vegan diet what would you substitute cow's milk with? The best milk for a baby at least for a year or as long as it lasts, is mother's milk. Babies start getting teeth around six months for a reason and by the time they are a year old, they have their teeth and can chew. The best foods to give them are fruits. If you want to make nutritious milk, blending a banana with water would be perfect.

Weight loss is one of the biggest challenges today. In an attempt to shed a few kilos, we try different diets which do not always work. Can you share a tip that will help us? I have noticed that animals in nature are not overweight. On a trip to Africa, I saw many zebras and abundant grass that they fed on but there was not even a single overweight zebra nor a lion that was overweight even though there were so many zebras. In nature, we do not see obesity but in humans we do; because animals do not consume the wrong foods.

Fat as we are all aware is the cause of obesity and many believe it only comes from mouth

like oil, butter and ghee. But meat, chicken, fish, and milk also contain fats and this can be seen when we cook as these fats float on top. Interestingly, when we cook plants that contain fat like sesame, avocado, coconut, peanuts and others, we will not see fat on top. This is because only plants have fibre which holds on to the fats and if we eat these plants in the whole form, like using coconut instead of coconut oil, we will not put on weight as the fibre will prevent us from overeating. If we refine these plants then we can overeat and not even realise it. Another example is sugarcane, in its raw form; we will not be able to eat much but refined sugar we can consume a lot and get addicted to it.

Many health experts have been recommending fermented foods for gut health. What is the efficacy of fermented foods to cure gut issues?

In my opinion, fermented foods are good but not everyone needs to eat them. We do not require a probiotic in our gut every day. When we want to make curd, we use a teaspoon of set curd to a bowl of warm milk to make a new batch. In the same way, there are already probiotics in our gut; what we need to do is stop taking antibiotics if we are taking any and then we can have the perfect micro biome. The microbiome which many may not be aware of is our second brain. Depression and anxiety can be due to the wrong foods that we are eating and the micro biomes present. Another cause of these conditions is our hormones; when we experience stress we release adrenaline and cortisol and dopamine when we are happy. Hence, when we consume animals, we consume the adrenalin that they have released.

Good micro biomes thrive on fibre which is available only in plants and hence whole foods plant-based diet is ideal.

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What would you like to see changed in our world? What conversation do you want to start to help move the needle forward?

To get healthy is the need of the hour; as we are sicker than ever before. We are busy building hospitals when we should be building good kitchens that make healthy food. By supporting the medical and pharmaceutical industry, what are we doing? By switching to a plant-based diet, we are saving animal lives, protecting our environment and bio-diversity and preventing climate change. At present, we are about eight billion on earth. However, 92 billion land animals alone are killed every year to feed us. To consume meat, we cut forests to grow grain which is required to feed those animals, at this rate what is going to happen to our planet? All this will eventually lead to climate change and disaster! We can save our planet by changing what we put in our mouth.