

# Dementia and South Asian Community

The report highlights importance of research to study the impact of dementia on South Asian Community and emphasizes on Culturally appropriate services to treat dementia.



*The study is conducted at Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS)*

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## **What is Dementia?**

Dementia is an overall term that is used to refer to a number of symptoms that are caused by disorders affecting the brain. Signs and symptoms of dementia can include a decline in short- and long-term memory, inability to plan, lack of reasonable judgement, basic math skills and awareness of people, places and time<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, dementia also impacts one's language, mood, behavior and ability to keep up with daily activities<sup>2</sup>. Although there is no one cause of dementia, factors such as unhealthy lifestyles, pre-existing health conditions, social isolation and lower levels of early life education do suggest having a correlation with dementia. As of 2017, more than 432,000 Canadian (6.9%) aged 65 and over were living with dementia<sup>3</sup>. Dementia is also more common in women as they are two thirds of those diagnosed. The risk of being diagnosed with dementia also doubles every 5 years for those who between the age range of 65-84<sup>4</sup>.

## **Prevention and Treatment:**

Although, there is no treatment that can reverse the cognitive decline that is brought on by dementia, there are approaches that can be taken to fight the symptoms and maintain quality of life

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<sup>1</sup>Alzheimer Society of Canada. "The Difference between Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementia." Alzheimer Society of Canada. 2020 (<https://alzheimer.ca/en/about-dementia/what-alzheimers-disease/difference-between-alzheimers-disease-other-dementia>).

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, "A Dementia Strategy for Canada: 2020 Annual Report" Health Canada Publications, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, "A Dementia Strategy for Canada: 2020 Annual Report" Health Canada Publications, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, "A Dementia Strategy for Canada: 2020 Annual Report" Health Canada Publications, 2020.

for as long as possible. According to scientific evidence, living a healthy life can prevent or delay dementia; including being more physically active, reducing or quitting alcohol and smoking and getting enough sleep daily. Ensuring that pre-existing health condition such as high blood pressure, cholesterol, heart or other vascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity are managed is also important. Research also shows that those who are living in isolated situation or have limited childhood education, they may also suffer social isolation and lower levels of education in early life can be causes of dementia<sup>5</sup>. Other preventative measures include but are not limited to:

- Stimulating your brain - playing games such as jigsaw, word or number puzzles, chess or memory games
- Trying something new- brushing your hair or teeth with your less dominant hand, learning a new language or how to play an instrument
- Making healthy food choices- eating a varied diet in of fruits and vegetables including foods rich in anti-oxidants, such as blueberries and spinach and omega 3 oils found in fish and canola oils
- Staying active- maintaining regular physical activity helps maintain cardiovascular health and can significantly reduce the risk of heart attacks, stroke and diabetes.
- Tracking numbers- keeping your blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and weight within the recommended ranges and levels can be very helpful in preventing dementia<sup>6</sup>

### **Dementia within the South Asian Community:**

There is a lack of research that exists on the impacts dementia has on the South Asian community creating difficulties in identifying, diagnosing and treating dementia. This is the case primarily due to low levels of literacy, language barriers and lack of appropriately translated and culturally adapted screening and diagnostic tools for this group<sup>7</sup>. A research study in the U.K. showed that there was a consistent message of limited knowledge and understanding of dementia

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<sup>5</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, "A Dementia Strategy for Canada: 2020 Annual Report" Health Canada Publications, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Alzheimer Society of Canada, "Heads Up for Healthier Brains Help for Today. Hope for Tomorrow... © What Everyone Should Know about Brain Health and Dementia." Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad H., "Awareness and Understanding of Dementia in South Asians: A Synthesis of Qualitative Evidence." Dementia, 2018.

amongst the South Asian community. While symptoms of dementia such as memory loss, were believed to be part of the normal ageing process, some South Asian caregivers viewed dementia as demons or God's punishments. Most studies report that many South Asians are explicit in associating stigmas with dementia<sup>8</sup>. Research also suggests that older South Asian populations are unlikely to visit mental health services with concerns about dementia if they believe that it is caused by the normal ageing process; that is to say, that they do not perceive it as a health problem and in addition they have cultural beliefs that people should be looked after within the family, and therefore do not perceive it as appropriate to consult professional help and support<sup>9</sup>.

### **Culturally Appropriate Resources:**

Although, there is a lack of local culturally appropriate resources, Alzheimer Society of British Columbia (ASBC) provide culturally-specific support for South Asian communities across B.C. in Punjabi and English. They have a hotline called The First Link® Dementia Helpline which is a resource for people living with dementia, caregivers, friends, health-care professionals or anyone with questions about dementia or memory loss. They also have a range of recorded dementia education webinars in Punjabi that are available anytime and anywhere in the world<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, local organizations in the Greater Toronto Area such as Punjabi Community Health Services and Indus Community Services, can share community resources and refer families to appropriate services in the community.

### **Conclusion:**

Dementia is not an easy disease to understand and it can be much more challenging to grasp and cope with due to a lack of community specific resources. Although it is common for seniors to have dementia, it is not the same ageing and can be prevented by keeping the brain stimulated through multiple different engaging activities and practices. It is important to view dementia as

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<sup>8</sup> Blakemore A., "Dementia in UK South Asians: A Scoping Review of the Literature." *BMJ Open* 8 (4), 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, S., "South Asian and White Older People and Dementia: A Qualitative Study of Knowledge and Attitudes." *Diversity & Equality in Health and Care* 2 (3), 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Alzheimer Society of British Columbia "Support for South Asian Communities." Alzheimer Society of British Columbia. 2020.

different from ageing in order to provide appropriate treatment and preventative measures. Ensuring good physical and mental health among seniors is one of the primary ways in which dementia can be prevented. Eating right, exercising, keeping the brain active and maintaining an overall healthy lifestyle can be extremely helpful for seniors to prevent the onset of dementia while ageing.