

## Health Care Issues Affecting South Asians in the United States September 2009

This factsheet answers questions about health care issues affecting South Asians in the United States and provides resources for further information. To learn more about health and the South Asian community, contact SAALT at [saalt@saalt.org](mailto:saalt@saalt.org).

### Do South Asians face difficulties accessing health insurance?

Like numerous other Americans, many South Asians find it difficult to obtain affordable health insurance. For example, did you know that one study<sup>1</sup> showed that:

- 1 in 5 South Asians lack health insurance?
- Approximately 40% of South Asians under the age of 65 reported no regular source of care?
- Even among the insured South Asians, 15% reported no regular source of care?

### What are the primary health concerns affecting South Asians?

South Asians confront a range of health issues, many of which are similar to the general population, but also include others that affect community members at higher rates. Primary health concerns for the South Asians include:

- **Heart Disease:** A major cause of death for South Asians is heart disease. In fact, one study showed that the rate of heart attacks among Indian men is twice that of the general population.<sup>2</sup>
- **Diabetes:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported a 14% prevalence rate of diabetes among South Asians, more than double the rate for Whites.<sup>3</sup> South Asian women have also reported higher rates of certain forms of diabetes during pregnancy.<sup>4</sup>
- **Cancer:** According to the California Cancer Registry, the three leading forms of cancer for South Asian men are prostate, colorectal, and lung cancer. South Asian women are most affected by breast, ovarian, and uterine cancer.<sup>5</sup>
- **Tuberculosis:** Rates of tuberculosis are higher among foreign-born South Asians, compared to other foreign-born and U.S.-born persons, according to studies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, E.R., Ojeda, V.D., Wyn, R., & Levan R. *Racial and ethnic disparities in access to health insurance and health care*, UCLA, Center for Health Policy Research (April 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Enas, E.A., Garg, A., Davidson, M.A., Nair, V.M., Huet, B.A., & Yusuf, S., "Coronary heart disease and its risk factors in first-generation immigrant Asian Indians to the United States of America", *Indian Heart Journal* (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, P.M., Adams, P.F., & Powell-Griner, E., "Health characteristics of the Asian adult population: United States, 2004-2006", *Advanced Data from Vital and Health Statistics* (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Retnakaran, R., Hanley, A.J., Connelly, P.W., Sermer, M., & Zinman, B., "Ethnicity modifies the effect of obesity on insulin resistance in pregnancy: A comparison of Asian, South Asian, and Caucasian women", *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> American Cancer Society, California Division and Public Health Institute, California Cancer Registry. California Cancer Facts and Figures 2006. Ocala, CA: American Cancer Society, California Division, September 2005.

- **HIV/AIDS:** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV/AIDS significantly affects the South Asian community.<sup>7</sup> Many acquire the disease after immigrating to the U.S. yet accurate information about transmission and treatment is seldom discussed within the community.<sup>8</sup>

## Do linguistic and cultural factors affect South Asians accessing quality health care?

The South Asian community is very diverse in terms of religious affiliation, cultural backgrounds, languages spoken, and English proficiency. This makes finding linguistically and culturally competent health information essential. When health care systems do not recognize language and cultural needs, it can have a significant impact on the treatment of South Asian patients.

- **Language Access:** Significant segments of the South Asians population speak limited English, including over 50% of Bangladeshis and over 30% of Pakistanis. Often, hospitals do not have adequately trained interpreters in South Asians languages. This can result in many patients relying upon family members to interpret or avoiding doctors' visits entirely.
- **Mental Health Concerns:** Rates of suicide within the South Asian community, particularly among young women, have been found to be higher than in other populations.<sup>9</sup> In addition, elderly South Asians confront a range of issues including acculturation and its mental health consequences.<sup>10</sup> Yet, mental health is seldom acknowledged within the South Asian community, often due to religious beliefs and cultural influences.<sup>11</sup> As a result, community members may be unwilling to seek professional help.
- **Health Concerns Affecting Survivors of Violence:** Survivors of domestic violence and hate crimes face the psychological and psychiatric results of their trauma.<sup>12</sup> Faced with community stigma around mental health, many South Asians suffer in silence. Thus, there is a great need for linguistically accessible and culturally competent general and mental health information and services for survivors of violence within the South Asian community.

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<sup>6</sup> Asghar, R.J., Pratt, R.H., Kammere, S., & Navin, T., "Tuberculosis in South Asians living in the United States, 1993-2004", *Arch Intern Med.* (2008).

<sup>7</sup> CDC Presentation on Asians and AIDS, provided by Jen Kim, Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS, New York City (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Chin, J.J., Mantell, J., Weiss, L., Bhagavan, M., & Luo, X., "Chinese and South Asian religious institutions and HIV prevention in New York City", *AIDS Education and Prevention* (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Patel, S.P., & Gaw, A.C., "Suicide among immigrants from the Indian subcontinent: A review", *Psychiatric Services* (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Rastogi, M., & Suthakaran, V., "Mental Health", *A Brown Paper: The Health of South Asians in the United States*, South Asian Public Health Association (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Panganamala, N.R., & Plummer, D.L., "Attitudes toward counseling among Asian Indians in the United States", *Cultural Diversity in Mental Health* (1998).

<sup>12</sup> See *supra* note 10.

## Where can I learn more about health issues affecting South Asians?

Various organizations provide a range of health-related resources and services for the South Asian community:

- **Counselors Helping (South) Asians/Indians:** Provides mental health referrals for South Asians in the Washington, DC Metro Area; [www.chaicounselors.org](http://www.chaicounselors.org)
- **South Asian Council for Social Services:** Assists South Asians in accessing health services and participates in health fairs in New York City; [www.sacssny.org](http://www.sacssny.org)
- **South Asian Health Initiative:** Engages in community-based research and education activities to bridge South Asians and the health care system in New York City; [www.med.nyu.edu/sahi](http://www.med.nyu.edu/sahi)
- **South Asian Mental Health Awareness of Jersey:** Provides support, education, and advocacy for South Asians affected by mental illness in New Jersey; [www.naminj.org/programs/samhaj/samhaj.html](http://www.naminj.org/programs/samhaj/samhaj.html)
- **South Asian Network:** Provides workshops, outreach, and case management on health issues in Southern California; [www.southasiannetwork.org](http://www.southasiannetwork.org)
- **South Asian Public Health Association:** Network of South Asian public health professionals that conducts research and raises awareness on health concerns within the community; [www.sapha.net](http://www.sapha.net)
- **Asian Pacific Islander American Health Forum:** National health policy organization that conducts advocacy and provides resources on health issues affecting AAPI communities; [www.apiahf.org](http://www.apiahf.org)
- **National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum:** National organization that conducts policy advocacy and provides resources on health issues affecting AAPI women and girls. [www.napawf.org](http://www.napawf.org)