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Tailor-made treatment

By Melissa Navas

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Parveen Jain ran down the list of reasons he might have chest pains and breathlessness. Maybe it was his asthma flaring up or the effects of a fall the night before. Jain, an Indo-American, was a lifelong vegetarian, only 44 years old at the time and didn't smoke or drink. Heart attack didn't even cross his mind.

Two doctor visits and 14 hours later, his doctor told him the words that would save his life: "Just rush to the hospital. Don't wait a minute." The San Jose man drove himself to the hospital and, within minutes of arriving, passed out. When he came to, doctors told him he had suffered a traumatic heart attack.

Jain is not alone. For South Asians, including the 200,000 living in the Bay Area, the rate of coronary artery disease is four times higher than the general population. Heart attacks happen at a younger age, more than half under age 50.

To raise awareness of the issue, El Camino Hospital in Mountain View will open a South Asian Heart Center this fall. The center, believed to be the only one of its kind in the United States, will provide information about treatments specific to South Asians.

Though common risk factors such as smoking, obesity and high blood pressure affect heart disease in South Asians -- people with origins in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka -- research shows there are other risk factors unknown to many doctors and patients.

In June, the center received its first \$1 million donation from Los Altos Hills resident Malini Alles, founder of Stree: Global Investments in Women. The center will cost \$1 million per year to run, and the hospital is seeking other donations.

"Silicon Valley is really the heart of the entrepreneurial spirit," said John Friedenber, president of the El Camino Hospital Foundation. "We have a South Asian population everywhere struggling to deal with this health care issue, and so we are presented with an opportunity to make a positive difference."

The center's education mission is to bridge cultural gaps between doctors and their patients, said Nivisha Mehta, the center's interim executive director.

For example, though many South Asians are vegetarians, that doesn't mean their food is cooked in a healthy way, Mehta said. A doctor who knows South Asian cuisine -- some of it fried, dipped in sugar or cooked in high-fat dairy products -- would be able to make specific dietary change recommendations.

In March, Saratoga resident Sulu Kapoor, 57, underwent a quadruple bypass heart surgery after learning her chest pains were caused by five blockages in three major arteries. She's overhauled her diet and stopped cooking her food in ghee, a high-fat butter.

She now uses Pam cooking spray, something not found in her native India. Sometimes she craves samosas, an Indian fried snack made with mashed potatoes and peas.

"The food is rich," Kapoor said. "I miss eating that, even though I know it's not good. I don't have a sweet tooth, but I do miss the fried foods."

Medical experts say some of the emerging risk factors among South Asians can be determined with blood tests that must be specifically requested during testing.

Enas Enas, a consultant to the center and an Illinois-based doctor who has researched heart disease among South Asians, said the tests cost between \$100 and \$200. People only need to be tested once.

Padma Srinivasan, a Hayward physician and president of the local chapter of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, said South Asian doctors may not be familiar with the issues either.

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Parveen Jain, 52, of San Jose works out on a treadmill at Bally's health club in San Jose.

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“We've studied only the risk factors of the mainstream community,” Srinivasan said. “So nobody's paid attention to this community in particular.”

The center will also focus on exercise plans, including referrals for yoga or meditation.

Jain, a vice president of marketing at McAfee in Santa Clara, racked up about 250,000 miles of business travel per year at a former job before his heart attack. He has since slowed his pace and even took time between jobs in 2000 to build the Jain Bhawan temple in Milpitas.

“All of us think we are Superman or Superwoman,” Jain said. “We ignore a lot of the symptoms that our body is giving us.”

The demands on South Asian immigrants are great, which contributes to health risks, Jain said.

“The Bay Area is a very competitive place, and you really have to give your 100 percent,” Jain said. “We work more to earn money to become secure so that our next generation will have a better lifestyle.”

For many, health care is an integral part of having that good lifestyle.

“Most physicians are treating their South Asian patients the same as they treat the rest of their patients,” Mehta said. “We need to be treated a little more aggressively.”

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Jain, a lifelong vegetarian, experienced a heart attack at the age of 44, and has since discovered that for South Asians, the rate of coronary artery disease is four times higher than the general population.