



Dr. Neda Amani Golshani's own regimen involves doing yoga for an hour twice weekly, running for half an hour twice a week and dancing or walking for half an hour whenever she can.

AN INNOVATIVE PRESCRIPTION

This physician takes a holistic approach to patient care: She helps women lose weight *and* learn to put themselves first **By Celia Milne**

Before Parisa Lashgari left Iran to immigrate to Canada in 2002, several friends told her she would gain weight when she moved to her new country. She didn't believe it. But sure enough, after a year of living in Toronto, Lashgari found she had gained 20 unwanted pounds. "It is common for immigrants to gain weight," says the 30-year-old kindergarten teacher, who admits that moving to Canada meant eating fewer fresh fruit and vegetables and more processed, fried and fast food. "And you have to use the car all the time. Back home, everything is within walking distance."

Weighing 180 lb.—too much for her five foot six inch frame—Lashgari wasn't happy. She wanted to be her previous weight of 160 lb., but "nothing really worked. I couldn't lose it," she says. So in 2004, she went to see a family doctor in Toronto who specializes in helping both men and women lose weight and keep it off.

As an Iranian-Canadian, Dr. Neda Amani Golshani is intimately familiar with the problems many immigrants face with a North American diet. In 1978, when she was seven years old, her family moved to Canada, and she watched as both her parents toiled. They worked hard to operate the family businesses, a dry cleaning store and coffee shop, to make sure that

their kids had a higher education. "They did everything to get us through."

Amani Golshani's own mother gained 40 pounds when they first came to Canada. The doctor now realizes that an almost-universal problem for women—and not just immigrant women—is that they tend to care for everyone but themselves. "The most common thing I see in my practice is people who become sick because they perform all their roles—whatever they may be—often too well, at the cost of not taking care of themselves."

Amani Golshani took Lashgari's measurements, performed a physical exam, and then suggested she enter a program the doctor had started called The Real You. Lashgari enrolled in the program for 12 weeks. She did weekly sessions with a personal trainer, who encouraged her to do 10 to 15 minutes of home-based exercises twice a day as well as a daily brisk walk of 30 to 45 minutes. Lashgari also saw Amani Golshani every week or two for medical assessment and nutritional counselling.

The result? "Within three months I lost all the weight I'd gained," says Lashgari. "And my body was toned." She has managed to maintain her desired weight of 160 lb. in the six years since then.

To Amani Golshani's patients, she's an inspiration. The 38-year-old is a tall, stylish woman with sparkling brown eyes and a magnetic personality. In 2000, after finishing a family practice residency at the University of Toronto, she set up a medical clinic in that city, where most of her patients were new immigrants. In 2005, she moved to Ottawa because her husband Ashkan, a →

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genetics professor at Carleton University, was transferred there. She now practises mostly in Ottawa and occasionally in Toronto, where she still has a clinic. With her passionate belief in the importance of physical activity, good nutrition and putting yourself first, she has nudged many of her patients back to a healthy weight.

According to Amani Golshani, doctors should be trained—and paid—to prevent disease, not just treat symptoms. “Exercise and good nutrition would put a dent in many of the most common diseases,” she says, including hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol, depression, insomnia, osteoarthritis, asthma and heart disease.

The genesis for The Real You program was the doctor’s own struggle with postpartum



Amani Golshani's own struggles led her to develop her program.

depression and weight gain after her daughter Ariana was born in 2001. It was only when she hired a personal trainer to help her get fit, and added resistance training to her cardio routine, that she started to lose weight and feel positive. That’s when she got the idea to bring her trainer to her clinic so her patients could have the same benefits (patients pay \$760 for the exercise portion; the rest is covered by provincial health insurance). Currently she is trying to establish The Real You program as a not-for-profit entity and acquire funding so patients don’t have to pay, or can get private insurance to cover the full cost. Her dream is that the program will be adopted by doctors throughout Canada and the United States. (It’s already

spreading. Lethbridge, Alta., family doctor Calvin Stewart created a similar program after meeting Amani Golshani at a medical conference in 2002.)

When Amani Golshani launched The Real You, most of her clients were ethnic women, but today many are non-ethnic. One of them is Colleen MacKenzie, a 62-year-old grandmother who has Parkinson’s disease. She had been gaining weight since going into menopause at 43, shortly after her youngest son, Blair, died in a car crash. In June 2008, she started the program.

“Over 13 weeks, I was able to lose 28 pounds through a combination of exercise, weight training and diet—just eating healthier—and also allowing time for myself, for meditation, a shift of mind,” says MacKenzie.

“It was not just weight loss; my whole condition improved. My hair is better, my stamina is better, my skin has a better texture.” MacKenzie calls Amani Golshani an incredible motivator. “She has given me back the feeling that I am of worth. I knew it, but she made me *feel* it. That’s her uniqueness.”

Driving positive change is what Amani Golshani thrives on. “This is the most satisfaction I’ve had as a physician. I can really help people fulfill their potential and make *themselves* a priority,” she says.

Five years after their daughter was born, Amani Golshani and her husband had a son, Arman, who is now three. She had more severe postpartum depression this time around, and required support and medication, so she is never blasé about health. Today, she incorporates her children into her own fitness routine, doing squats with Arman on her shoulders and doing “the plank” with Ariana on her back.

Other ways she lives her best life? Amani Golshani gets eight or nine hours of sleep at night, and prays and meditates regularly. She rarely drinks alcohol and keeps her sugar and fat intake down. “My biggest vice is caffeine,” she says with a laugh. “Taking care of myself is the only way I can do the dance of life to my best ability.” And that’s a message she enjoys sharing with her patients. □

DR. AMANI GOLSHANI'S PRESCRIPTION FOR BETTER HEALTH

Speak to your doctor about a healthy eating plan and exercise regimen that's right for you.

NUTRITION

- Eat whole foods, not processed.
- Avoid red meat; limit processed meat. Eat fish one to three times a week.
- Eat lots of legumes (beans, chickpeas, lentils), soy and raw nuts.
- Eat lots of colourful vegetables—at least two to three servings a day.
- Eat fruit at every meal and snack; aim for five to seven servings a day.
- Eat complex carbohydrates, such as whole-grain breads, including kamut, spelt and rye, as well as brown rice and buckwheat pastas, and whole grains such as couscous and quinoa.
- Limit white rice, white bread and white pasta.
- Avoid foods with a lot of added sugar including cakes, pastries, cookies and sweetened cereal.
- Drink six to eight glasses of water per day (she says if it's room temperature, it aids digestion).
- Beware “no-fat” products: They are often highly processed and include lots of sugar to replace the fat.
- Avoid saturated fats such as butter, margarine and fried foods.
- Stick to 1% dairy, and eat cheese only once a week.
- Eat good fats such as olive oil, grape seed oil, avocado and nuts.
- One day a week, eat whatever you want, and savour every bite!

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Combining these three types of exercise is ideal for weight loss, maintaining muscle, preventing disease, maintaining flexibility and balance, preventing injury and promoting bone health:

- **Cardio conditioning** (dancing, walking, biking) three or four times a week for a minimum of half an hour. It can also be a few 10- to 15-minute intervals throughout the day.
- **Resistance training** such as lifting weights, one hour, twice a week. Get individual instructions initially for safety and to get the most benefit.
- **Stretching** for 10 to 15 minutes a day. This includes yoga, tai chi or Pilates.