

Diabetes: A Preventable Epidemic?

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November is National Diabetes Awareness Month, the American Diabetes Association works diligently to bring awareness to this multi-factorial chronic disease as it affects 7.8% of the population. The statistics of diabetes tell a staggering story of a diabolical condition that rarely kills, yet is a leading cause of death worldwide and its prevalence is growing at an alarming rate.

The medical term ***diabetes mellitus*** comes from the Greek words meaning “to go through” (diabetes) and “honey” (mellitus) referring to sweetness. Diabetes is a family of medical conditions involving the body’s ability to metabolize, store, and make use of glucose, which is the main energy source for all the cells in the body. This process of converting what we eat and drink into something the body can use requires insulin, a hormone produced by the pancreas. When a person has diabetes, their body’s ability to process glucose is impaired or nonexistent, either because the pancreas cannot produce enough insulin or cells no longer respond to insulin.

While there are four primary types of diabetes; the most prevalent is ***Type 2 diabetes***. Type 2 diabetes accounts for about 90% of the diagnosed cases. This type of diabetes is characterized by a persistent state of high levels of sugar (glucose) in the blood or urine, but not because of a lack of insulin. Instead, there is an abundance of insulin, but it no longer works as effectively as it should. The good news is with early detection this form of diabetes is preventable and, for many, reversible.

There has been much advancement in the management of diabetes and the terminology, diagnostic criteria and prevalence of diabetes have changed over the years but the basic treatment has not. Because diabetes is a multi-factorial disease, management requires a multi-factorial solution: early detection, lifestyle

changes, nutritional guidance and when necessary medications. Early detection and management is a key to prevent the serious complications that accompany diabetes. Have you ever been told, “Your sugar is a little high” or “you are getting a little sweet”, or casually told to “watch the sweets”? Be your own advocate, talk with your healthcare provider, ask about your blood glucose levels and if there is a trend that they are increasing. You may have heard the terms ***insulin resistant, impaired glucose or pre-diabetes***. At this early stage this could be you. By the time a healthcare provider informs you, “You have diabetes” (this means your fasting blood glucose level has met the diagnostic criteria of 126mg/dL,) you have actually had metabolic impairment for up to 10 years or more.

You may be at risk of developing type 2 diabetes if you have: a high carbohydrate diet, obesity, a sedentary lifestyle, high blood pressure, problems with cholesterol and triglycerides, dark, thickened skin around your neck or armpits or a family history of diabetes. For women, additional risk factors include: giving birth to a baby weighing more than 9 pounds or having gestational diabetes.

Data from the 2007 national Diabetes Fact Sheet (the most recent year for which data is available)

Total: 23.6 million children and adults in the United States have diabetes

Pre-Diabetes: 57 million people

New Cases: 1.6 million new cases of diabetes are diagnosed in people aged 20 yrs and older each year.

The numbers are staggering and the prevalence expected to grow. When I obtain a family health history from patients, I am surprised at the “casual-ness” of the response, “yea, mom and dad are in good health, they just have diabetes”. As if it is expected and in some way ok. Diabetes, like other chronic disease is not inherent as we age! You owe it to yourself to be proactive and optimize your health. Talk with your healthcare provider to assess your risk of diabetes and determine the best course of action. It may simply require minimal lifestyle changes to ward off a chronic disease.