

Diabetes: The Silent Killer

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It is the fifth deadliest disease in the United States and 17 million people—6.2% of the population—have it. It is often called the Silent Killer.

Diabetes is an equal opportunity disease, affecting men and women fairly equally, and does not discriminate based on race. In fact, African Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, American Indians, and some Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are at higher risk for developing diabetes than Caucasians. People who have a family history of diabetes, high blood pressure or cholesterol, or women who had gestational diabetes during pregnancy are also at higher risk.

The incidence of diabetes increases with age. In adults 65 and older, 7 million, or 20%, have diabetes. Diabetes is called the silent killer because so many people are unaware that they have the disease. The American Diabetes Association (ADA) estimates that 5.9 million people are undiagnosed.

Diabetes is a disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin, a hormone that is needed to convert sugar, starches, and other food into energy needed for daily life. It is a chronic disease that has no cure.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, diabetes is characterized by high levels of blood glucose, resulting in defects in insulin production, insulin action, or both. There are two types of diabetes: Type 1 and Type 2.

Two Types

Type 1 accounts for 5-10% of diagnosed cases. It was previously called juvenile-onset diabetes because it usually strikes children and young adults. Type 2 diabetes (adult-onset diabetes) accounts for the majority of diagnosed cases.

Cells in the body do not use insulin properly, causing the need for insulin to rise. The pancreas, which produces insulin, loses its ability to do so. Insulin allows glucose (sugar) to enter cells and be converted to energy. When diabetes is not controlled, glucose and fats remain in the body, essentially starving cells and damaging vital organs.

Unchecked, diabetes can cause grave damage, most commonly blindness, heart disease and stroke, kidney disease, and nerve disease and amputation. Some people do not have symptoms, or they are overlooked and mistaken for other health issues.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommends adults 45 or older who are overweight have their blood glucose tested, and that all adults over 45 be tested at least every three years.

Carol Hughitt, R.D. C.D.E., program coordinator of HealthSouth's Diabetes Life Skills Program, called attention to the recently concluded Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) of the National Institutes of Health. DPP was the first major clinical trial in the United States to show that moderate changes in diet and exercise can delay and possibly prevent Type 2 diabetes in a diverse population of people with Impaired Glucose Tolerance, a pre-diabetic condition. The DPP found that modest weight loss (5 to 7 percent of body weight) and increased physical activity can cut a person's risk of developing type 2 diabetes by more than half.

The DPP "has become a very helpful tool in talking with people," said Hughitt. She and her cohorts emphasize a three-pronged approach through which diet and exercise are under the patient's control, while medication, if needed, is under the physician's control.

Diet & Exercise

Many people with Type 2 diabetes can control their blood glucose by following a careful diet and exercise program, losing excess weight, and taking oral medication. Most adults with diabetes take insulin or oral medicine; 11% take both.

Elaine Mooney, area manager for the Washington, DC chapter of the ADA (which includes Virginia) noted the increasing incidence of pre-diabetes, which occurs when a person's blood-glucose levels are higher than normal, but not high enough for a diagnosis of diabetes.

"Studies show that 11% of people with pre-diabetes develop Type 2 diabetes," says Mooney. "You can delay the progression of diabetes by walking 30 minutes each day and losing weight,"

Eating a diabetes-friendly diet does not necessarily mean bland food. Numerous cookbooks offer tasty recipes for diabetes including the newly released *1,001 Delicious Desserts for People with Diabetes*, *Light and Easy Diabetes Cuisine*, and *The Diabetes Double Quick Cookbook* published by Surry Press.

Many diabetes resources available. Start with the ADA, available at 800-342-2383 and www.diabetes.org. The CDC's "Diabetes Public Health Resources" can be found at www.cdc.gov/diabetes/. Such resources should not, however, take the place of proper evaluation and care by a qualified physician.

Box: Warning Signs

The American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org), which has designated November as American Diabetes Month, advises us to be aware of these warning signs:

- Frequent urination
- Unusual thirst or weight loss
- Extreme hunger or fatigue
- Irritability
- Frequent infections (especially skin, gum, or bladder) or cuts and bruises that are slow to heal
- Blurred vision
- Tingling/numbness in hands or feet