

Diabetes: An Epidemic Among African Americans

Written by Melody Mendiola, MD
Friday, 26 March 2010 15:01



Diabetes is a leading cause of death in the United States and is a growing epidemic among the Black Americans. The statistics are staggering: according to the National Institute of Health, 3.7 million Black people - that's nearly 15 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks ages 20 and older - have diabetes. The good news is that diabetes can be managed, and even prevented.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a disorder of higher-than-normal blood sugar (glucose) levels. It occurs when your pancreas either does not produce enough insulin, or your body does not respond correctly to insulin. Your body produces insulin to help it store and use nutrients from the food you eat.

There are different types of diabetes. Type 1 diabetes used to be known as juvenile diabetes. Type 1 diabetes happens when your body attacks and destroys its own insulin-making capabilities in the pancreas. Type 2 diabetes - formerly called adult-onset diabetes - occurs when the body does not make enough insulin or cannot use the insulin it makes effectively. Gestational diabetes occurs during pregnancy, and is a risk for Type 2 diabetes later in life.

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Type 2 diabetes is the most common form among Black Americans.

What are the risks of having diabetes?

For people with diabetes, heart disease and stroke are leading causes of death - in fact, two out of three people with diabetes die of heart disease or stroke. In diabetics, smoking doubles the risk for heart disease. Diabetes can lead to kidney failure (nephropathy) which may require chronic dialysis, or blindness (retinopathy). Diabetes can also damage the nerves in the arms and legs leading to pain, numbness, and possibly amputation.

How can you prevent heart disease, stroke or other complications of diabetes?

Diabetes is a self-managed disease, which means that if you have diabetes, it's up to you to take care of it on a daily basis. This means eating healthy foods, incorporating physical activity in your daily routine, seeing a doctor for medications, taking your medications as prescribed and testing your blood glucose levels.

Your healthcare provider can work closely with you to reduce any other risk factors. The American Heart Association suggests the following guidelines:

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- o Control your weight and blood cholesterol with a low-saturated-fat, low-cholesterol diet.

- o Be physically active for at least 30 minutes on most or all days of the week.

- o If you drink alcohol, don't have more than one drink per day for women or two per day for men.

- o Lower your blood pressure, if it's too high. People with diabetes should keep blood pressure under 130/80 mm Hg.

- o Don't smoke, and avoid other people's tobacco smoke.

- o Specific medicines may help you control your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose. Your doctor will advise you if one is right for you. If you take medicine, take it exactly as directed. If you have questions about the dosage or side effects, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Can Type 2 Diabetes be prevented?

Yes! In fact, the Diabetes Prevention Program, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, conducted a study of people who had pre-diabetic symptoms (meaning they had high glucose levels but not enough to be diagnosed with diabetes). People who participated in the study: 1) lost about 7 percent of their body weight (that's 10 to 14 pounds for a person weighing 200 pounds); 2) were physically active for 30 minutes a day, five days a week (most chose brisk walking) and 3) made healthier food choices. The study showed that type 2 diabetes can be

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delayed or prevented in overweight adults with pre-diabetes, including African Americans. If you have risk factors for developing diabetes, you should talk to your doctor about lifestyle changes that may reduce your risk.

How do I know if I have type 2 Diabetes?

You could have diabetes if you've noticed increased thirst, frequent urination (especially at night), weight loss, blurred vision, numbness or tingling in the feet and hands, frequent infections or slow-healing wounds. These symptoms may develop gradually over time or some people may have no symptoms.

You may be at greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes if you:

- " are overweight or obese
- " are 45 years or older
- " have high blood pressure
- " have high cholesterol
- " are not getting enough physical activity.

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How can I learn more about preventing or managing diabetes?

HCMC offers free community education and support programs that can help people with diabetes and their families know more about the disease and how to manage it.

The Hennepin Diabetes Education Program offers comprehensive education and training designed to help you to control diabetes, be and feel healthy and improve your quality of life. For more information, call (612) 873-6800.

The Hennepin Diabetes Support Group offers information and discussion about diabetes related topics. Together, people with diabetes share their experiences related to living with diabetes. The support group also provides a forum for people coping with diabetes challenges to obtain help and advice from one another, as well as from healthcare professionals.

This group meets on the second Tuesday of each month from 10 am - 11:30 am in the HennepinCenter for Diabetes and Endocrinology, which is located on the first floor of the Shapiro Building. For more information, please call (612) 873-6800.

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In short, diabetes is a chronic medical condition that can put one at risk for serious health complications. However, by working with your doctor, and a comprehensive team, you can learn to manage your diabetes to live a full, healthy and active lifestyle.

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