

## **SENIORS AND DIABETES**

### **While The Implications Of Diabetes Can Be Dire, For Many Seniors The Illnesses Is Avoidable And Treatable**

By Linda Margiloff, M.D.

Diabetes has traditionally been viewed as a senior citizen's disease. Although incidents of childhood diabetes have climbed steadily in recent years, the disease still afflicts the elderly in great numbers. In fact, of the nearly 21 million Americans with diabetes, 40 percent are 65 years old or older. And according to the American Geriatrics Society, this percentage is expected to increase in the coming years.

The health problems that diabetes presents to seniors are considerable. People with the disease are more likely to suffer from blocked arteries, nerve damage, loss of vision, and kidney disease, and loss of limbs. The rates of heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, and blindness are twice as high in older adults with diabetes. And if you are African American, Native American, or Hispanic you are twice as likely to get the disease.

While these facts sound grim, the news isn't all bad. In fact even if you are in one of these high risk groups, there is a lot that you can do to prevent diabetes. And if you are diagnosed with the disease, it can be treated affectively by a combination of lifestyle changes and medication.

#### **The First Step: Diagnosis**

If you are worried that you may have diabetes, or that you may be at risk, the first thing you should do is look at your risk factors. Are you African American, Native American, or

Hispanic? Is there a history of diabetes in your family? Are you overweight? Are you habitually inactive? If you answered yes to any of these questions you should evaluate your own health to see if you have any of the symptoms that are common among diabetics.

There are ten primary symptoms to uncontrolled diabetes:

- Increased thirst
- Increased or excessive urination
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fatigue
- Loss of vitality
- Wounds that are slow to heal
- Foot sores
- Numbness or tingling in the feet
- Confusion
- Depression

Obviously the presence of one or more of these isn't a guarantee that you have diabetes. However these symptoms are clear indicators that you may be at risk, and if you have them you should see your doctor immediately. With a simple blood sugar test your doctor can determine whether you have diabetes or are at risk for the disease.

And even if you don't have these symptoms you should be checked out every year—in fact everyone over 45 should be tested annually. You should also continue to examine yourself: make sure that your skin doesn't suddenly become excessively dry and that your feet don't develop calluses or wounds that you can't feel. Most people don't find out that they have

diabetes until the disease has advanced to the point where there is already damage, so it is important to regularly check for warning signs.

### **The Next Step: Treatment**

If you do have diabetes or are pre-diabetic there are a number of things you can do to improve your health. First, work with your doctor to create a medication program that will control the illness. The days when everyone with diabetes had to be injected with regular doses of insulin are over. Today there are a number of different drugs that can be used to control diabetes.

It is equally important for you to speak with your doctor about the other risks that are associated with diabetes, such as heart disease and stroke. Make sure that your doctor is addressing these risks as well.

As important as medical treatment is though, the most important thing you can do is change your lifestyle. For instance most people with diabetes need to lose weight, and losing just 7% of your body weight can significantly cut diabetes-related risks. 7% may seem like a lot, but for a person weighing 200 pounds, that's only a loss of fourteen pounds.

Diet is a key to living a healthy life, but unfortunately the American lifestyle isn't always conducive to maintaining a healthy diet. And of course, it's not realistic to ask people to give up foods they've grown to love like red meat and breads. However, you can significantly reduce your risk by consuming less healthy foods in moderation. Rather than eating red meat three or four times a week, try cutting back to once or twice and substituting more fish, veal, or chicken.

And, in fact, even healthy foods should be eaten in moderation. Our metabolism slows over time, and as we get older we need less food to survive. Portion control is vital no matter how healthy our food choices are.

Another excellent way to improve your health is to eat with others because people tend to eat better in a social environment. Senior centers and churches often offer excellent opportunities to eat healthy meals with other seniors.

Also, keep something non-perishable to eat in your bedroom. People with diabetes often suffer unexpected dips and spikes in the blood sugar levels, which can lead to lightheadedness or even unconsciousness. You can reduce this risk by always having food close at hand.

Of course, being healthy involves more than just diet. You can also cut your diabetes risk by becoming more active. Evaluate your current level of exercise and increase the amount by as much as you feel you can handle.

Finally, smoking is another huge lifestyle factor that can lead to diabetes or complicate the condition of people who have the disease. So if you still smoke it is essential that you quit.

### **Taking Care Of Yourself**

Diabetes has practically become an epidemic in recent years, particularly among seniors. However, you can significantly cut your risk for diabetes and other related health issues if you keep a close watch on your symptoms and adopt a healthier lifestyle. Diabetes is more avoidable and manageable than ever before. You just need to be aware of the risks and take the necessary steps to avoid them.

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