

Diabetes – know the risks



Diabetes can have a major impact on your life, particularly if you develop complications that are associated with the disease.

Diabetes is a condition in which there is too much glucose (a type of sugar) in the blood because the body is unable to use it properly. This is because the body's method of converting glucose to energy is not working as it should. Diabetes is generally divided into two categories:

- **Type 1** diabetes is often referred to as 'juvenile diabetes' because it most commonly begins during childhood or adolescence. It is characterised by the destruction of the pancreatic cells that manufacture insulin. In type 1 diabetes, daily insulin injections are required for survival.
- **Type 2** diabetes usually occurs later in life and is more common in people who are overweight. In type 2 diabetes, the body still produces insulin but the cells are unable to recognise it, causing blood levels to remain high. Treatment includes diet and exercise and in some cases oral medication may be required.

Diabetes complications

Having either type 1 or type 2 diabetes can put you at increased risk of developing many complications — some of them life-threatening. This is because over time, high blood glucose levels can damage the body, in particular the large and small blood vessels of the body.

Damage to the large vessels can cause complications relating to the brain, heart and blood pressure such as:

- Heart disease (i.e. heart attack and angina)

- Stroke
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure

Damage to the small vessels can cause problems in the eyes, kidneys, feet and other systems of the body that rely upon nerves such as:

- Reduced vision or blindness
- Kidney damage which can result in kidney failure requiring dialysis or transplant
- Pain and cramps in your extremities
- Peripheral vascular disease (i.e. gangrene of the toes and feet requiring amputation)
- Foot problems such as non-healing ulcers, numb feet, and foot deformities
- Gastrointestinal problems such as bloating, indigestion, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and constipation
- Bladder complications including bladder infections
- Erectile dysfunction (impotence) in men and vaginal dryness in women

There is no cure

The bad news when it comes to diabetes is that there is currently no cure. Managing diabetes involves a

combination of medication, diet and exercise. Once diabetes is out of control, it is very difficult to manage it. Initially type 2 diabetes is treated through lifestyle modification, including healthy diet and regular exercise. However, as the disease progresses, people with type 2 diabetes are often prescribed tablets to control their blood glucose levels.

The good news is that research has shown that up to 60 per cent of diabetes cases may be prevented, or delayed, simply by maintaining a healthy weight. Weight reduction and management is best achieved by exercising often and eating well, which means a low-fat, low-GI diet.

What can you do?

Unfortunately, type 1 diabetes is an auto-immune disease and as yet cannot be prevented.

On the other hand, type 2 diabetes is a lifestyle disease and as such, there is much you can do to lower your risk. Your risk of developing diabetes increases if:

- There is a family history of diabetes
- You are overweight
- You have high blood pressure
- You have a history of heart disease or stroke
- You had gestational diabetes

The best way to minimise your risk of type 2 diabetes is to maintain a healthy weight, eat a healthy varied diet (i.e. less fat, especially saturated fat and more fibre), and to get regular moderate exercise (i.e. 30 minutes on most days). Even quite modest diets and lifestyle changes can reduce the progression from pre-diabetes to diabetes by 50-55 per cent.

If you feel you are at risk of diabetes, make an appointment to speak to your doctor. It is far better to put strategies in place to prevent it, than wait for it to take hold.

