

## **Nearly 18.2 million Americans have diabetes – are you at risk?**

By Lisa Stansbury, MS, LDN, RD, CDE

An estimated 18.2 million people in the United States have diabetes, but nearly one third of them don't even know they have the disease. The total represents more than 6% of the population who have diabetes, which is more common in African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Even when people know they have diabetes, they often ignore it because many of its symptoms seem harmless. But to ignore diabetes is a major health mistake because diabetes increases the risk for heart attack, stroke, complications related to poor circulation, damage to kidneys, eye problems leading to blindness, damage to the nerves that run throughout the body (neuropathy), foot and skin problems and depression.

Diabetes is a disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin. Insulin is a hormone that is needed to convert sugar, starches and other foods into energy which is needed for daily life. The cause of diabetes continues to be a mystery although both genetics and environmental factors such as obesity and lack of exercise appear to play a role.

Non-insulin dependent Diabetes (Type 2) is the most common form of diabetes, resulting from insulin resistance (the body fails to use its own insulin properly) combined with relative insulin deficiency. Type 2 Diabetes was once considered a disease of adults only, but is now being seen in children, probably due to increasing obesity and lack of exercise. People with a family history of diabetes, overweight individuals who do not exercise regularly, certain ethnic and cultural groups and women who have had gestational diabetes are most at risk for this type of diabetes.

Pre-diabetes is a condition that commonly occurs when a person's blood glucose level is higher than normal but not high enough for a diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes. There are 41 million Americans, ages 40 to 74, who have pre-diabetes.

Insulin Dependent Diabetes (Type 1) results from the body's failure to produce insulin, a hormone that "unlocks" the cells of the body to let glucose enter and fuel them. This type of diabetes most often occurs in children and young adults. It is estimated that 5-10% of Americans who are diagnosed with diabetes have Type 1 Diabetes. At highest risk are siblings of people with Type 1 diabetes and children of parents with Type 1 diabetes.

Gestational Diabetes occurs in pregnant women who have never had diabetes but who have high blood sugar (glucose) levels during pregnancy. Gestational diabetes affects about 4% of all pregnant women – with about 135,000 cases diagnosed in the United States each year.

The symptoms of diabetes are frequent urination, unusual thirst frequent or recurring infections. extreme hunger, blurred vision, unusual weight loss, slow healing of cuts and bruises. extreme fatigue, tingling or numbness in hands or feet, irritability and impaired sexual function. These can occur independently or in combination.

Over the past few years we have seen great improvements in the methods of treating and self-managing diabetes. These new methods allow much better control of blood glucoses and offer hope in avoiding or minimizing the long term complications of diabetes. Individualized programs on adjustment and management of diabetes can help people with diabetes lead productive and complete lives. The primary objective is to help people control their disease and to learn the appropriate steps to begin the treatment process.

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