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Diabetes

Although family-related, everyone is at risk

What is Diabetes? It is a disease occurring when insufficient insulin is produced by the pancreas, a large gland behind the stomach, and this affects the regulation of blood glucose. Glucose, or blood sugar, enters the cells in the body and is usually turned into energy. A reduction or absence of insulin will interrupt this natural process, sometimes to a critical level. Even in the early stages, a person suffering from diabetes may experience a number of symptoms such as: thirst, hunger, frequent urination, fatigue and blurred vision. These of course, may be dismissed as being attributed to other causes; but they are an indication that something is not quite right and diabetes is a possibility. Before jumping to conclusions however, a wise decision would be to consult the family doctor.

Who is at risk of diabetes? There are two types and both are medically accepted as being conditions which tend to run in the family. Although the exact genetic cause of the disease is not known, it would seem that anyone who has a family history of diabetes is likely to be affected. 85-90 percent of all cases in this category will eventually have to seek treatment of some kind; and as a rough guide, adults over the age of 45 used to be the main target group; but in recent times it is presenting in young adults, adolescents and even children. Also at risk are people over the age of 35 from ethnic backgrounds such as Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders; plus those of the same age group from the Pacific Islands, the Indian sub-continent, or having a Chinese cultural background.

Type 2 diabetes is apparently the most common and, if diagnosed early, is the easiest to treat. Unfortunately, signs of type 2 are not always evident at first and the disease is frequently diagnosed later in life. As a consequence, by then the long-term complications may already be present. Rather than putting certain developing changes down to getting older, a number of them could be warning of the possibility of type 2 diabetes. Some of these symptoms to be aware of are:

being excessively thirsty and passing more urine; always feeling hungry; gradually putting on weight for no apparent reason, or alternatively losing weight; feeling tired and lethargic; cuts and abrasions don't heal as quickly as they used to; having blurred vision, feeling dizzy and suffering headaches; leg cramps and mood swings are also symptoms of the disease.

In effect, anyone is at risk of type 2 diabetes if they have a family history of the disease; are over 45 years of age; are overweight, particularly carrying too much fat around the waist; or have high blood pressure. One other group includes women who have birthed a child over 4.5 kilos, have had gestational diabetes when pregnant, or had Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS).

What can be done to combat type 2 diabetes? Obviously, expert professional advice should be sought as early as possible. Medication might be prescribed, even insulin injections in some cases. What will be recommended are changes towards achieving a better lifestyle; such as losing weight, getting more regular exercise, and switching to a healthier diet. Encouragingly, it is reported that people following these guidelines have been able to slow the progression of the condition; and in some instances have halted the disease altogether.

Type 1 diabetes. Aside from an accepted strong genetic link, the cause of type 1 diabetes is not known; but unlike type 2, it is a lifelong condition for which there is no cure, and lifestyle modifications have little effect. It presents when the body's autoimmune system activates to attack the beta cells in the pancreas halting the production of insulin, in turn allowing a build up of glucose. The kidneys then try to flush out the excess glucose resulting in dehydration. Meanwhile, the body is burning its own reserves of fat to supply energy, and this releases chemicals called ketone bodies which start to accumulate. With the incidence of high glucose and excess ketone levels plus dehydration a condition known as ketoacidosis occurs; and if it is not treated it can be fatal.

Approximately 10% of all diabetes cases are type 1 and it is the most common of conditions in young children. It presents quite abruptly with the obvious symptoms of unexplained weight loss; frequent and excessive thirst and urination; weakness and fatigue, along with blurred vision. Although it can strike at any age, in adults Type 1 is usually much slower to appear; and people under the age of 30 are more likely to be diagnosed with it. As mentioned, there is no cure.

Treatment of type 1 diabetes. It will require the constant monitoring of blood glucose levels and these can be controlled with regular injections of insulin, sometimes several times a day. In certain cases an insulin pump may be prescribed to deliver this. Leading a healthy lifestyle is still important, even though it won't fix type 1 diabetes; but it can delay the progress of type 2; and encouragingly in some cases, beat it altogether.

The main and most important message is: if you have some or all of the symptoms of diabetes, don't dismiss them. Seek medical advice straight away. It could be a life-saver.

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