number one diabetes risk factor: obesity

Staying healthy and active can prevent type 2 diabetes

When most people think about Type 2 diabetes, they imagine people getting sick because they consume too much sweets. That’s not really the case. “Everybody thinks it’s about consuming too much sugar, but the reality is diabetics can’t use sugar where they need it,” says Dr. Lamont Weide, chief of diabetes and endocrinology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Medical School. “They may make it and make more than a normal person, but they can’t make enough to overcome their resistance, which is usually caused by obesity.”

The number one risk factor for diabetes is obesity. There are other factors, but weight is one of the biggest predictors of whether or not someone will have this chronic condition.

“If you are overweight, your risk is more than 10 times what it would be if you were a healthy weight,” says Dr. David Robbins, an endocrinologist and director of the Diabetes Institute at The University of Kansas Hospital.

Type 2 diabetes is often a preventable condition. Watching your weight and staying active can help dramatically reduce your chances of getting a diabetes diagnosis.

WHAT IT IS?

There are three main types of diabetes, gestational, type 1 and type 2. All three revolve around the body’s inability to produce or properly use insulin (a hormone that turns the sugar we consume into energy).

Gestational diabetes occurs during pregnancy, when a woman’s hormones inhibit her ability to use insulin properly. According to the American Diabetes Association, about 18 percent of women will be impacted by the condition, which typically goes away post-pregnancy.

Type 1 diabetes accounts for about 5 to 10 percent of total diabetes cases. Also known as juvenile diabetes, it is an autoimmune disorder in which the body doesn’t produce insulin.

By far, the most widely diagnosed form of diabetes is type 2 diabetes. It accounts for upwards of 90 percent of total cases and is now found in people of all ages. In this type, the body either does not produce the necessary insulin or the body’s cells can’t use it properly. When the sugar isn’t used, it builds up in the blood instead of the cells.

ARE YOU AT RISK?

Aside from obesity, there are a handful of risk factors for type 2 diabetes. Two of these are age and genetics. The risk of diabetes tends to increase after the age of 45 because, as we age, we produce less insulin. The condition is also more likely to occur in people who are African American, Hispanic or American Indian.

Symptoms of diabetes include frequent urination, thirst, sores that don’t heal...
and, according to Weide, women with the condition are prone to having yeast infections.

“The simplest rule for prevention is staying healthy and active,” Robbins says. Even small amounts of physical activity and weight loss—losing 5 to 10 percent of your body weight—can delay or stop onset,” he says.

“You don’t have to be what you were at 20 and you don’t have to run a marathon,” Robbins says. “Activity increases the body’s ability to respond to insulin; for the amount you make, you get a greater response and more sugar moves out of the blood.”

EARLY RECOGNITION
To be diagnosed with diabetes, you have to have fasting blood glucose levels of 126mg/dl or A1C levels of 6.5 percent. But even levels lower than that – 100 mg/dl and A1C of 5.7 – are too high and indicate prediabetes.

Prediabetes is the period of time where insulin and glucose levels are becoming abnormal. According to Robbins, about 50 percent of people with slightly elevated levels will eventually become diabetic.

“The frightening issue is that the risk of heart disease is almost as high in someone who is prediabetic as someone who is already diabetic,” Robbins says. “It is a pretty bad situation that merits immediate attention.”

COMPLICATIONS
Early detection and action is important because keeping blood sugar levels steady reduces the risk of complications.

“There are very clear guidelines for getting blood sugars average and few of our patients reach that goal,” Robbins says. “The length of time you are out of whack in the early phase of the disease affects what happens later.”

According to Robbins, type 2 diabetes is the leading cause of adult kidney failure and blindness. It also increases the risk of stroke and heart attack, which is the leading cause of death for diabetics.

TREATMENT
Doctor usually recommend exercise, weight loss and a healthy diet to treat type 2 diabetes. If your blood glucose levels can’t be regulated this way, the first medication often prescribed is Metformin, one of six kinds of oral diabetes medications on the market. These drugs work to increase the release of insulin, help the body absorb it more readily or slow the breakdown of starches.

Over time, Robbins says a diabetic’s body becomes less able to produce insulin and approximately 80 percent end up needing insulin injections.

“It’s about choices and moderation,” Weide says. “It is always easier to prevent weight gain than to change habits and go backwards, because habits are difficult to break.”

LOWER YOUR RISK
The American Diabetes Association website offers several extensive guides to improving personal health to eliminate or reduce diabetes risk and diabetes symptoms. Here are a few basic tips to follow:

**Physical activity** lowers not only type 2 diabetes risk, but it also reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. Besides engaging in daily exercise, daily movement can be extremely helpful in reducing the risk of these diseases. Taking the stairs, getting up and taking a walk around the office and stretching before bedtime can all be beneficial methods for adding physical activity to everyday life.

**Healthy eating** is at the core of creating a healthy lifestyle. Be sure to make a grocery list to keep shopping on track and free of junk food. Switch out frying for grilling, particularly lean meats, such as chicken and turkey. Start meals with a salad or a brothy soup with lots of vegetables. This fills the stomach up with healthy vegetables before higher fat and calorie main courses.

**Set Goals** if risk level is high and a change needs to be made. It is best to accept this change and commit to several goals for establishing a healthier lifestyle. First, examine what you are ready, willing and able to change. Keep the goals realistic. For example, add more fruits and vegetables to a diet instead of changing everything you eat.

For more information, visit the American Diabetes Association website at diabetes.org.