

Healthwise Column: What You Need to Know About Diabetes – Exploding 4 Myths
About a Common Condition

by Davidicus Wong, M.D., November 6th, 2022

If you were in a room with 10 other adults, odds are one of you has diabetes.

The prevalence of diabetes in adults over age 20 is 1 in 11, and the incidence of diabetes is expected to increase as the population ages, becomes less active and more obese.

There's a good chance that you – or someone that you care about – will develop diabetes.

That's why we all need to know more about it.

November is Diabetes Awareness Month. In spite of being a very common condition, most people know little of it. Here are 4 common myths about diabetes.

Myth #1: It's all about sugar.

Diabetes is a problem with metabolism - how your body converts food into energy.

Because glucose is a source of energy for every cell in the body, diabetes has potential effects on multiple organ systems, including the nervous and circulatory systems.

Poorly controlled diabetes is a major cause of heart attacks, strokes, kidney failure, amputations and blindness. A person who has had diabetes for several years is considered by physicians to have the same risk of a heart attack as someone who has established vascular disease.

Poorly controlled diabetes is a common cause of erectile dysfunction. More bad news: Viagra doesn't work as well for people with diabetes.

Myth #2: Diabetes is caused by being overweight or consuming too much sugar.

This myth is popularized repeatedly by news media. At least once a year, newscasters announce an epidemic of diabetes caused by consuming too much sugar or junk food.

This just confuses the public about the real risks for diabetes.

There are two types of diabetes. Type I is insulin-dependent. For some reason, usually related to the immune system, the pancreas no longer produces sufficient insulin. This can follow a viral infection. Type I diabetes requires insulin injections or infusions. There is a rare genotype that renders one more likely to develop this autoimmune version of diabetes.

90% of diabetes is type II or insulin-resistant. This is more commonly a hereditary condition. You might inherit a tendency for diabetes from your mother or father. As you grow older or gain weight, your cells may become more resistant to the effects of your body's own insulin. You become glucose intolerant, and carbohydrates, such as rice, pasta and potatoes cause a greater rise in your blood sugars than they normally should. Not everyone who is overweight or drinks a lot of pop will develop diabetes, but if you have the genes for type II diabetes, gaining weight, getting older and consuming excessive sugar will allow diabetes to manifest.

Myth #3: All diabetics have to take insulin and check their blood sugars many times each day.

People with type I diabetes – because they do not produce enough natural insulin – are dependent on insulin injections or infusions. They have to monitor their blood sugars regularly throughout the day to keep their glucose levels in a safe range.

Most people with type II diabetes do not require insulin with the onset of their condition so they usually do not have the same need for multiple daily glucose testing. There are a variety of oral medications to control type II diabetes. Two essentials are regular physical

activity and smaller, more frequent meals with low glycemic index foods (carbohydrates that do not cause a sharp rise in blood sugars).

If blood sugars continue to rise beyond a safe level, insulin may be needed.

Myth #4: Everyone with diabetes will get complications.

Some people who remember their parents dying from the complications of diabetes are distraught with a new diagnosis of diabetes in themselves, but I remind them that recognizing diabetes early can be a positive opportunity to improve their lives. With knowledge and support in partnership with their family doctors, they will be able to live full and active lives.

With the careful management of diabetes, most of the complications of diabetes can be avoided. This requires optimal self-management in which individuals are given the support and education they need to be effective managers of their own health.

In addition to blood sugars, we monitor and manage blood pressure, cholesterol levels, changes in the eyes and kidney function.

I'll be giving a free online presentation on "What You Should Know About Diabetes" at 7 pm on Thursday, November 17th, 2022. You'll learn if you are at risk for diabetes and how you can prevent it; how diabetes can affect your heart, circulation, nervous system and brain; and what you would need to know to effectively manage your health and avoid these complications.

To register for this free online event, contact Leona Cullen at (604) 259-4450 or register online: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Myi-nF5hS96QX-OHKzjGsw

This presentation is part of the Burnaby Division of Family Practice's Empowering Patients public education series.

Dr. Davidicus Wong is a family physician and his Healthwise columns appear regularly in this paper. For more on achieving your positive potential in health, see his website at www.davidicuswong.wordpress.com. For more information about diabetes, talk to your family doctor or check the Canadian Diabetes Association's website www.diabetes.ca.