

American Diabetes Month – The role of prevention

By: Donna L. Hollinger

Many of us have been touched by diabetes – either personally or through a relative, friend, or neighbor we know. Therefore, it's probably no shock that diabetes is on the rise. According to the American Diabetes Association, almost 24 million or 8% of the U.S. population have diabetes. What may be surprising, however, is that approximately 57 million Americans have pre-diabetes or an increased risk of developing type 2, the most common form of diabetes. Fortunately, we can reverse this risk.

Research studies like the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) demonstrate the power of prevention. In the DPP, people with fasting blood sugars of 95 to 125 mg/dl were able to reduce their risk for developing type 2 diabetes by 58%. This was accomplished through modest weight loss, healthful food choices, and increased physical activity. Diabetes risk reduction was also achieved with the medication metformin. However, the lifestyle changes were found to be much more effective than the medication.

So, bottom line: to prevent type 2 diabetes, lifestyle choices are pivotal. To support a healthy weight and lower diabetes risk, consider the following lifestyle guidelines from the American Diabetes Association.

- **Play up your physical activity.** Exercise decreases blood sugar and increases sensitivity to insulin both of which help to maintain normal blood sugar levels. Try building up to 150 minutes or more of moderate physical activity a week since this was the goal in the DPP. Examples of moderate physical activities include brisk walking, biking, dancing, yard work, and swimming. Experiment with spreading activity throughout the week such as 30 minutes per day five days a week. Explore different options to see what might work best for you.
- **Slash saturated and trans fat.** Not only does reducing saturated and trans fat help with weight control it may also independently decrease insulin resistance which is a risk factor for diabetes. Ideas for eating less saturated and trans fat include choosing poultry, fish, and lean meats like those with the words “round” or “loin” in their name. Choices for low-fat dairy products are growing rapidly, so options abound. Think about using soft tub margarines for spreads and liquid vegetable oils in place of solid fats in cooking.
- **Fill up with fiber.** Fiber-rich foods promote satiety and support weight management. Dietary fiber has also been linked to type 2 diabetes risk reduction. High-fiber foods appear to improve insulin secretion as well as insulin sensitivity, both of which help to maintain blood sugar levels within a normal range. To boost the fiber in your meals and snacks, make fruits and vegetables a regular feature. Enjoy main dishes highlighting beans and try adding beans to soups and salads. Whole grain foods such as whole wheat bread, oatmeal, and brown rice are well-known sources of fiber. But, popcorn, barley, and corn tortillas count as well. Nuts and seeds with their crunchy texture are also high on the fiber scale.

In honor of National Diabetes Month, consider a small step you might be willing to take to lower your diabetes risk or the risk of someone you love.

#####

Donna L. Hollinger MS, RD, LD is a registered dietitian in the Nutrition Center at the UI College of Public Health. The Nutrition Center focuses on research, education and counseling in nutrition and lifestyle change. Contact her at donna-hollinger@uiowa.edu.