

Regular primary care helps prevent diabetes

By Luke Leary

When I was six years old, my grandfather had his right leg amputated below his knee. I did not know it at the time, but this was the first in a string of complications related to diabetes, a serious illness that would eventually take his life. Today we know more about how to prevent complications of diabetes and how to keep people from even developing this disease.

Diabetes affects how your body turns food into energy. The disease typically occurs when your body loses the ability to regulate blood sugar and the levels rise too high. Diabetes can lead to damage to your heart, kidneys or nerves and can contribute to a multitude of other health problems.

In the United States, more than 37 million people have diabetes. This is just over 11% of the U.S. population. Diabetes is the sixth leading cause of disability in the United States and is the seventh leading cause of death. Life expectancy at age 50 is six years shorter for people with Type 2 diabetes than for people without it.

In Montana, more than 7,000 people are diagnosed with diabetes every year. Countless others are living with undiagnosed diabetes or with prediabetes. Prediabetes means that blood sugar levels are higher than normal yet not high enough yet to be diagnosed as Type 2 diabetes. Diagnosed diabetes costs Montanans an estimated \$820 million for healthcare each year.

The good news is that with proper screening and management diabetes can be well controlled. Regular visits to your primary healthcare provider allow you to get screened for diabetes or to manage existing disease. Proper blood sugar management can lower your risk of disease complications by 40%.

Lifestyle changes can be effective tools in fighting diabetes. Your primary care provider can provide you with resources and techniques to improve your blood sugar control. A reduction of body weight of just 5% to 7% through exercise and healthy diet can prevent diabetes. The same amount of weight loss can also lead to improved blood sugar numbers for those who already have diabetes.

Your primary care physician can also help you take control of your diabetes with medication. Certain medications can help lower your risk for heart attack, stroke and kidney damage. Medications that aid in managing blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol levels can protect the body from complications caused by uncontrolled blood sugar.

Diabetes is a chronic illness that requires frequent monitoring. You may also need adjustment of your medications to keep you healthy. Regular visits with your primary care provider are essential steps for managing or preventing diabetes.

Dr. Luke Leary, a family physician at RiverStone Health Clinic, can be reached at 406-247-3306.