Understanding and preventing Type 2 diabetes

By Amanda Gallagher

Type 2 diabetes is a nationwide epidemic that affects both children and adults, yet it remains one of the most preventable chronic diseases. It occurs when your blood sugar (glucose) levels are too high. Over time, elevated blood glucose can lead to serious health problems like kidney disease, heart disease and nerve damage. Uncontrolled blood sugar levels can also harm your eyes, cause foot and skin problems and delay wound healing.

One of the most effective ways to diagnose and monitor diabetes is through the Hemoglobin A1C (A1C) test. This test measures your average blood glucose level over the past three months. Glucose in your bloodstream attaches to hemoglobin, which is the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. The higher your blood sugar levels, the more glucose attaches to the hemoglobin. Your results are given as a percentage: the higher the percentage, the higher your average blood glucose. A normal A1C level is below 5.7%.

Risk factors

A combination of genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors can increase your risk of developing diabetes. Common risk factors include:

- Obesity or being overweight
- Physical inactivity
- Unhealthy diet
- Age and ethnicity
- Pre-existing conditions such as heart disease or depression
- Smoking or excessive alcohol use

While you can't change your genetics or family history, small lifestyle changes can make a big difference. Healthier eating habits and regular physical activity are powerful tools in preventing or managing diabetes.

Nutrition and healthy eating

In today's fast-paced world, convenience often takes priority, and reading food labels or meal planning might not make your daily to-do list. The freezer aisle in any grocery store is filled with quick-fix meals that may be convenient but are often packed with preservatives, sodium, and artificial ingredients.

The good news is that technology makes healthy eating easier than ever. There are countless free online resources to help you plan nutritious meals and learn healthy cooking techniques. Many recipes now include options for swapping traditional ingredients with healthier alternatives so you can eat well

without sacrificing flavor. Trusted sites like DiabetesFoodHub.org offer free cooking classes, and numerous free apps can help with meal planning, portion control and recipe inspiration for every lifestyle.

Physical activity

Regular physical activity is just as important as a healthy diet in preventing or managing diabetes. The best part? You can start right where you are. Even if you haven't exercised in years, it's never too late to begin. You don't need a gym membership. Simple activities like walking, stretching, or dancing at home can have lasting benefits.

Start small and build gradually. A five-minute walk today can become a ten-minute walk tomorrow. Setting realistic, achievable goals helps turn activity into a sustainable habit. If you're unsure where to begin, talk to your health care provider about safe exercises or local programs. You can also explore free online fitness resources like YouTube videos for yoga, chair exercises or low-impact workouts.

When to talk to a health care provider

If you experience any of the following symptoms, even if they seem mild, talk with a health care professional about diabetes screening and prevention:

- Increased thirst
- Frequent urination
- Increased hunger
- Extreme fatigue
- Blurred vision
- Cuts or bruises that heal slowly
- Numbness, pain, or tingling in the hands or feet (common in type 2 diabetes)
- Unexplained weight loss (common in type 1 diabetes)

Early Detection Matters

Early detection and treatment of diabetes can greatly reduce the risk of complications and improve long-term health outcomes. Taking proactive steps like getting regular checkups, maintaining a balanced diet, and staying active can help you take control of your health and prevent type 2 diabetes before it starts.

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