



DIABETES – THE FACTS

What is Diabetes?

Diabetes is present when the glucose (sugar) levels in the blood become too high for good health. This is due either to not having enough insulin or because the insulin that is produced does not work as it should. The high blood sugar levels are usually accompanied by high fat (cholesterol) levels in the blood and in time these abnormalities may cause very serious problems. The person who has poorly controlled diabetes or who does not know that he/she has diabetes is more likely to develop a heart attack, stroke, poor circulation to the legs and damage to the eye sight and kidneys, than are people who do not have diabetes. When diabetes is well controlled, usually by relatively simple means, complications of diabetes are less likely to occur.

Since diabetes is common and may cause serious complications, all of which may be prevented, it is important to identify everyone who has diabetes and to ensure adequate treatment for all those affected.

There are basically two forms of diabetes.

Type 1 usually occurs before 25 years of age, possibly in early childhood. It usually has lots of symptoms and comes to medical attention quickly. In order to treat this form of diabetes, which is due to lack of insulin, it is necessary to inject insulin at least on a daily basis. This is called Insulin-Dependant Diabetes.

Type 2 occurs after 40 years of age, is usually associated with being overweight and possibly with a family history of diabetes. This form of diabetes does not require injections of insulin but does require weight loss and sometimes treatment with tablets and is called Non-Insulin Dependant Diabetes.

Both forms of diabetes cause the complications of diabetes and therefore must be taken seriously.

Is diabetes common?

About 2-3% of the general population have diabetes.

However, amongst older people diabetes is more common, being present in about 5% of those over 50 years and increasing further with additional age. The likelihood of diabetes increases in first degree relatives of people with diabetes i.e. siblings and when people are overweight.

Is diabetes present?

Diabetes may not have any symptoms but when they are present they usually consist of increasing thirst, increased passage of urine, particularly noticeable as

it may disturb sleep on one or more occasions each night and possibly discharge and itching in the genital region.

Treatment

- **Non-Insulin Dependent Diabetes**
Treatment is simple and usually consists of weight loss following a special diet. This diet is low in sugar and fat but high in unrefined carbohydrate such as wholemeal bread, fruit and vegetables. Sometimes it is also necessary to use special tablets which will help the insulin in the body to work efficiently.
- **Insulin-Dependant Diabetes**
People who have this form of diabetes also require to follow the special diabetes diet but usually do not require to lose weight. Insulin is usually injected two or three times daily before meals. Advances have been made recently both in the measurement of blood glucose and the delivery of insulin which have made management more convenient. This has greatly facilitated the ease with which insulin can be given.

Is diabetes well controlled?

People with diabetes can test their blood and urine to tell what the glucose level is.

Convenient devices allow a drop of blood to be taken from the finger, applied to a test tape which is then either read directly against a colour chart or placed in a meter which gives a precise measurement. With this information people with diabetes will know whether their diabetes is well controlled or not and will allow them to make adjustments in their treatment to improve control, if that is necessary.

Who is likely to have diabetes?

Diabetes that comes on after 40 years of age may not be associated with any symptoms and anyone who is over 40 years and overweight, or who has diabetes, should arrange with their doctor to have a simple blood test to establish whether or not they have diabetes. If the test proves that diabetes is not present then there is no need to worry about it, but if diabetes is present, then the opportunity is there to start treatment straight away and prevent the complications of diabetes which frequently develop quite silently. Of course, if the classical symptoms of diabetes are present at any age (increasing thirst and passage of urine and weight loss) they should be brought to the attention of a general practitioner without delay.

What happens when diabetes is diagnosed?

The general practitioner will usually be able to make the diagnosis of diabetes and start treatment straight away. Most of the large hospitals have special diabetes clinics which organize education sessions for people with diabetes and their families. Here may be discussed their special problems with a dietician and if necessary with a chiropodist, or eye specialist. A shared care between the diabetic clinic and your general practitioner is desirable.

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