



the sweet and lowdown

Getting diabetes is more than having a “touch of sugar”—it’s a silent threat to your health. Here, what you need to know to stay well and, hopefully, disease-free. by judith springer riddle

ONE YEAR AGO, CATHY PREYER-Briggs, 42, noticed that she was feeling exhausted, irritable and hungry nearly all the time. On top of that, she was up half the night, running to the bathroom to urinate. Initially, she thought the stress of being a full-time wife and mother of two was the problem. “I figured I was lacking some sort of vitamin, because all I wanted to do was sleep,” recalls Preyer-Briggs, who lives in Upper Marlboro, Md. But after several months passed with no relief, she called her doctor. He took a quick look at her medical history and suspected diabetes.

Preyer-Briggs had developed gestational diabetes, which affects 2 to 5 percent of all pregnant women but disappears after the baby is born, with both of her pregnancies. That meant she had a better than average chance of developing Type II diabetes later in life. Sure enough, medical tests revealed that she had Type II. Like millions

of African-American women, Preyer-Briggs had no idea she was at risk, and was unaware of the warning signs.

Now that she’s receiving treatment, Preyer-Briggs understands that diabetes can be beaten. Even if diabetes runs in your family, you can prevent it and manage it with healthy eating, daily exercise and medication.

Breakthroughs and Other News

Whether you’re at risk for Type I or Type II, scientists and health organizations are making great strides in controlling diabetes and teaching people how to avoid getting sick. Two preliminary studies report that a new drug may stop Type I (insulin-dependent, juvenile diabetes) in its tracks. This is the first treatment to offer hope that early intervention can prevent or curtail Type I, which affects 5 to 10 percent of people with diabetes and often begins in childhood.

The American Diabetes Association (ADA) is also working to educate women about how to beat one of the most dangerous complications of diabetes—heart disease. Currently, women with diabetes have eight times the risk

of dying from a heart attack in their 40s and 50s than those who don't have the disease. The ADA's Be Smart About Your Heart: Control the ABCs of Diabetes initiative showed women how to manage their blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol, the key elements that must be controlled to decrease diabetes-related heart-disease risk. Free information is available; call 800-DIABETES.

How Vulnerable Are We?

One in four black women over age 55 has diabetes, the seventh leading cause of death in the United States. "More women are dying than men with diabetes," says James R. Gavin, III, M.D., Ph.D., past president of the ADA and chair of the African-American program in Maryland.

We're almost twice as likely to have the disease as non-Hispanic whites and at an earlier age. One of the reasons is obesity, a major risk factor for Type II, but not Type I. Fifty percent of all black women are overweight, compared with 33 percent of white women. The even greater tragedy is the fact that one-third of us are living with diabetes and don't know it. "By the time many of us are diagnosed, we've already had the disease for at least seven to 10 years," Dr. Gavin says.

Long delays in treatment lead to serious health complications. This may be why blacks are twice as likely to suffer from diabetes-related blindness; two-to-three times more likely to have our toes, feet and legs amputated due to poor circulation, nerve damage (neuropathy), and clogged blood vessels; and 2.6 to 5.6 times more likely to develop kidney disease.

Diabetes 101

What is it about this disease that wreaks so much havoc? Diabetes affects your body's ability to produce or properly use insulin, a vital hormone secreted by the pancreas that's responsible for getting the glucose, or sugar, you derive from food into your cells to be used as energy.

In a healthy person, large amounts of glucose in the blood alert the pancreas to secrete insulin into your bloodstream so it can nourish your cells. For people with Type II,

Know The Warning Signs

See your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms regularly.

- ❖ Frequent urination
- ❖ Unquenchable thirst
- ❖ Ravenous appetite
- ❖ Excessive weight loss
- ❖ Exhaustion
- ❖ Irritability
- ❖ Frequent infections
- ❖ Blurred vision
- ❖ Cuts or bruises that heal slowly
- ❖ Tingling or numbness in the hands and feet
- ❖ Recurring infections of the skin, gums and bladder

The Tests to Request

If you suspect you have diabetes, here are the tests your doctor should order.

Fasting plasma glucose test. Your doctor will measure your blood-sugar levels after an eight-hour fast. Normal readings are less than 110 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dl). Levels of more than 126 mg/dl indicate that you have diabetes, Dr. Gavin says.

Oral glucose tolerance test. Your doctor will measure your blood sugar after you fast and drink a sugar solution. A normal level is below 140 mg/dl. If it's 200 mg/dl or higher, then you have diabetes, Dr. Gavin explains.

either the pancreas doesn't pump enough insulin or your cells reject it. Glucose then builds up in your blood, allowing the cells to starve and, over time, causing damage to the eyes, kidneys, nerves and heart.

In Type I, the immune system destroys insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas, so that it secretes little or no insulin at all. Gestational diabetes results from hormonal changes or a shortage of insulin during pregnancy.

How to Protect Yourself

You don't have to live in fear of diabetes; here's how to prevent it or manage it successfully.

Know your risk. You're at high risk for Type II if you have a parent or sibling with the disease; you've had gestational diabetes or gave birth to at least one baby weighing nine pounds or more; you're overweight; you get little or no exercise; you have high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Type I is solely genetic in origin.

Get tested. Doctors suggest that African Americans begin testing at age 35 and every three years afterward. If you don't have diabetes, but your blood-sugar levels are high, you have impaired glucose tolerance (IGT), a precursor to diabetes.

Move your body. The latest ADA research reveals that anyone can dramatically cut their chances of getting Type II diabetes by 58% or reverse IGT by simply eating a healthy, low-fat diet and exercising regularly. Just 30 minutes of daily brisk walking or aerobics can help you lose weight and stabilize blood-sugar levels.

Eat lean. Limit your fat intake to 25 percent of total calories. Choose foods high in nutrients but low in fat, such as fruits, vegetables and lean meats. Bake instead of frying. Go easy on the butter and gravies, and cut back on the sweets. Here's a clever trick: "Take your dinner plate and fill half of it with vegetables. Fill one-quarter of it with a starch and the remaining one-quarter with lean meat," says Maudene Nelson, R.D., a certified diabetes educator and past president of Health Care and Education for the ADA in New York City. You'll gain better control of your blood-sugar levels, which is key to preventing and managing the disease. ☼