

# Diabetes Myths

Diabetes is a complex disease. You may have heard conflicting theories on what causes it, how it is diagnosed, and how it is managed. If you are affected by diabetes, you will want the truth about the disease. Here are some common myths that you may have heard:

**There is no diabetes in my family, so I don't have to worry.** Diabetes does run in families, but many people diagnosed with the disease have no close family members who have it. Lifestyle, heredity, and possibly other factors, such as certain viruses, may increase risk for the disease.

**It's called sugar diabetes, so it must come from the sugar I eat.** When you eat food, the body turns it into a form of energy called glucose, also known as "blood sugar." Glucose is not the refined sugar that you buy in stores. Insulin helps move the blood sugar into the body's cells for energy. When the body's own insulin does not work well or when not enough is made, the blood sugar level rises. Then the person has diabetes.

**I'll know that I have diabetes by my symptoms.** A person with type 1 diabetes, usually seen in children and young adults, will have obvious symptoms, because they have little or no insulin, the hormone that controls the blood sugar level. However, people with type 2 diabetes, which usually occurs later in life, or women who have gestational diabetes, the diabetes that only appears during pregnancy, may have few or no symptoms. Their symptoms are milder since they still produce some insulin. Unfortunately, they don't make enough insulin, or it is not being used properly. Only a blood test can tell for sure if someone has diabetes.

**My doctor says I have "borderline" diabetes. Since I have just a "touch of sugar," I don't have to worry.** There is no such thing as borderline diabetes. To many people, "borderline" means they don't really have the disease, so they don't have to make any changes to control it. This is wrong. If you have diabetes, you have diabetes. Diabetes must be treated and taken seriously.

**By drinking water, I can wash away the extra sugar in my blood and cure my diabetes.** Although you can wash away sugar spilled on a table, you cannot wash away a high blood sugar level by drinking water. However, you can control diabetes by eating healthy food, being physically active, controlling your weight, seeing your medical team regularly, taking prescribed medications, and monitoring your blood sugar often.

**Insulin is a cure for diabetes.** Insulin is not a cure for diabetes. At this point, there is no cure; there are only medicine and behaviors that can control diabetes. Insulin helps to control diabetes by keeping the blood sugar from rising.

**My friend takes insulin pills to control her diabetes.** Insulin is a protein; it cannot be taken by mouth because the stomach would not digest it. Insulin must be given by injection or insulin pump through the skin. Diabetes pills help by making the body produce more insulin, use its own insulin better, produce less blood sugar from the liver, or limit carbohydrate absorption after a meal.

**If I don't take diabetes medicine, my diabetes must not be serious.** Not everyone who has diabetes takes diabetes medicine. If the body produces some insulin, weight loss, healthy eating habits, and regular physical activity can help insulin work more effectively. However, diabetes does change over time, and diabetes medicine may be needed later.

**If I get diabetes, I will never be able to eat any sugar.** To control one's blood sugar, all sources of carbohydrates must be controlled. Carbohydrates include starchy foods like pasta and bread as well as sugary foods like candy. Even juice, milk, and fruit all contain carbohydrates, so they must be eaten in moderate amounts. With careful planning, small amounts of sugar can replace other carbohydrates usually eaten at a meal. Too much sugar is bad for everyone. It provides only empty calories.

**I have diabetes, and I've seen its effect on family members. I know there is nothing I can do about it.** Remember that diabetes is serious, common, costly, and CONTROLLABLE. There are many things people with diabetes can do to live a full life, while preventing or delaying complications. You can control your diabetes by eating healthy foods, staying active, losing weight if needed, taking medicine as prescribed, testing your blood sugar, and seeing your health care team.

# Diagnosed With Type 2 Diabetes, Now What?

## What Is Type 2 Diabetes?

Type 2 diabetes is the most common type of diabetes in the United States; it affects at least 90 percent of those who have diabetes. It occurs when the blood glucose (sugar) level is too high. Blood sugar is the fuel that the body cells use for energy. Type 2 diabetes occurs because there is either not enough insulin produced by an organ called the pancreas or because the body is less sensitive to the insulin it produces. Insulin helps the body get the blood sugar into the cells.

Most people who have type 2 diabetes are over the age of 40, overweight, and do not get enough physical activity. Weight control, increased physical activity, and, in some cases, diabetes medicine can help improve blood sugar levels. Diabetes cannot be cured, but it can be controlled. By controlling blood sugar levels, the complications of diabetes, such as kidney disease and blindness, may be delayed or even prevented.

## Treatment Goals

The main goal for diabetes management is good blood sugar control. The American Diabetes Association suggests that blood sugar levels should be 80–130 mg/dl before meals. Your doctor will recommend a desirable range for you. Keeping your blood sugar as close to your target range as possible will help keep you healthy.

Other important health goals for people with diabetes are lowering high blood pressure and decreasing cholesterol and triglyceride (blood fat)

levels. If these are high, you may be more at risk for heart disease and stroke.

A big goal for anyone who smokes is to stop! Smoking accelerates all of the problems associated with diabetes, because it cuts blood flow and oxygen to the cells.

## Good Nutrition Matters

Your food choices will affect your diabetes control. Foods that contain natural or added sugar or starch (carbohydrates) will affect your blood sugar more than foods that are mainly protein or fat. A registered dietitian can help you create a healthy meal plan using a variety of your favorite foods.

Controlling calories is important for diabetes control. A weight loss of just 10 to 20 pounds can make a big difference in your blood sugar and blood pressure control. Drinking plenty of water, eating higher fiber foods, and eating less fat will help. Watching your sodium intake is also helpful if you have high blood pressure. Limiting solid fats will help control your cholesterol level.

Most people find that eating the same amount of food at about the same time each day helps them control their blood sugar. Skipping meals is a bad idea, especially if you take diabetes medicine. Missing a meal also makes you more likely to overeat later.

Healthy eating is good for both you and your family.

## Getting Active Is Important

Blood sugar and weight control are very difficult to achieve without regular physical activity. Activity may include merely moving around more during the day, driving less, taking the stairs more often, doing yard work, or walking the dog, all of which increase caloric use.

Regularly scheduled exercise is also good. For weight loss, exercise that gets the heart rate up helps the most. Good choices are brisk walking, swimming laps, water aerobics, and biking. If you have not exercised regularly lately, have a doctor's exam before you start. The results of this checkup will help you choose the activity that is best for you.

The main goal is to do more of something you enjoy. You should exercise 5 to 7 days a week. Exercising with a partner or group may help you better stick to your program. Exercising at the same time each day may make your blood sugar levels more predictable.

## Blood Sugar Monitoring

Blood sugar monitoring is the only way to tell how well you have your diabetes under control. Your medical team will tell you how often to check. These blood sugar readings will help you see patterns in your diabetes control. If you have three values at the same time each day that are above or below your target range, you may need to change your eating, exercise, or medication habits. Recording your blood sugar readings, what you ate, what you did that day, and how much medicine you took will help you see those patterns.

There are many monitors available. A diabetes educator or a pharmacist can help you decide which one is best for you. Always take your monitor and blood sugar records with you when you see your medical team. They can test to be sure your

monitor is working correctly and that you are checking it properly.

## Medication Choices

New medicines for diabetes seem to appear every day. Your doctor will decide which medication is right for you. Some people with type 2 diabetes may only require better eating habits and more physical activity to control their diabetes. Medication needs can change over time, so you may switch diabetes medicines or add medicine more than once. Blood sugar monitoring is essential in deciding the correct amount of diabetes medicine for you.

Diabetes pills work in different ways. They are not insulin. Some pills cause your pancreas to produce more insulin. Some make your liver produce less blood sugar after meals. Others slow the absorption of carbohydrate. Another type makes you more sensitive to insulin. You may need one or more of these medicines to control your diabetes.

You may need insulin shots. Some people need insulin along with diabetes pills.

How often you take insulin depends on how much insulin your body still produces and how closely your doctor wants to control your diabetes. Different types of insulin last different amounts of time. Your medical team will tell you how much of each kind you need to take and how often.

## Don't Be Overwhelmed

Diabetes is a complex disease, and it takes time to develop the skills needed to control it. A certified diabetes educator can help. Ask your doctor to refer you to an educator to learn more about diabetes. A diabetes support group may also help. You will be surprised how much you will learn and how much easier it is to adjust your diabetes care so that it fits your lifestyle.