

Diabetes - the new epidemic

The Health Column

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A huge number of Australians suffer from diabetes, and our modern lifestyle is only increasing the alarming statistic. At present some 3.61 million Australians have diabetes or pre-diabetes while worldwide 366 million people are affected. National Diabetes Week runs from July 13 to 19 and we are all encouraged to have checks and learn more about this disease.

According to the Australian Diabetes Council (ADC) diabetes is a chronic disease that occurs when there is too much glucose in the blood. This happens if the body is not producing insulin or not using insulin - a hormone needed for glucose to enter the cells and be converted to energy - properly.

Glucose is a particular type of sugar - it's essential for normal healthy body function. Insulin is the hormone or chemical messenger that controls the uptake of glucose by muscles, liver and fat tissues.

There is some confusion about the various types of diabetes.

Type 1 diabetes is condition in which the pancreas does not produce insulin. This type represents 10-15 per cent of all cases of diabetes and is one of the most common chronic childhood diseases in developed nations. Type 1 diabetes is not caused by lifestyle factors, yet its incidence is increasing at a rate of about 3 per cent a year.

In type 2 diabetes, which accounts for about 85% of all people with diabetes, insulin is still produced but does not work effectively. While it most often affects mature adults, more young people, even children, are getting type 2 diabetes. It's very much a lifestyle disease and linked to the overall increase in weight among the population.

Less well known is gestational diabetes - a form of diabetes that occurs in pregnancy and mostly disappears after the birth. This type may be caused by the woman's body not being able to make enough insulin or not being able to use it correctly during pregnancy. It is usually found by having a blood test between 24 and 28 weeks of pregnancy.

We should also be aware of pre-diabetes which is a condition where blood glucose levels are higher than normal, but not yet high enough for a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes. Left untreated it may develop into type 2 diabetes within 5 to 10 years.



Photo by Linh Le

The food we eat and weight management are key elements of diabetes management. Being overweight is a huge risk. While the underlying causes of obesity are complex, the resulting problems are well known: type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disease, social exclusion and low self-esteem.

The ADC says it is important to take a balanced view with regard to nutrition; drawing on a range of foods rather than focusing on single nutrients as “good” or “bad”. No single nutrient is responsible for weight gain or loss, but our total kilojoule (or calorie) intake from all food is what can cause problems.

During National Diabetes Week visit your local pharmacy to learn more about diabetes and how it can be managed. If you have any of the risk factors for diabetes such as excess weight or smoking, now is the perfect time to ask your pharmacist about lifestyle changes.

Pharmacies can offer a range of resources and support for diabetes including:

- Diabetes screening tests with referrals to your doctor.
- Diabetes management services including monitoring of blood glucose levels, weight and diabetes medicines.
- Advice on diabetes medicines.
- Review of diabetes medicines.
- Weight management services.
- Blood glucose monitoring devices.
- Supply of blood glucose test strips as part of the National Diabetes Services Scheme.
- Quit smoking products and services.
- Health information including Self Care Fact Cards.

You can get more advice on diabetes from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's (PSA) Self Care health information. Self Care Fact Cards include *Blood Glucose Monitoring*, *Type 1* and *Type 2 Diabetes* plus *Weight and Health*. For the nearest location phone 1300 369 772 or log on to PSA's website at www.psa.org.au and under 'Supporting Practice' click on 'Self Care' then 'Find a Self Care Pharmacy'.