

Dealing with the D words

Self Care health facts column

V.1381
2013

23 October 2013



Dealing with the D words

For people with diabetes, having one chronic medical condition is usually quite enough of a challenge. When they're told they are also more likely to develop another potentially serious disease, maintaining a reasonably bright outlook on life could become even more of a struggle.

In fact, people with diabetes are three to four times more likely to develop cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disease – including heart attack and stroke. It seems if you have diabetes the fats (cholesterol and triglycerides) in your blood behave a bit differently. The “bad cholesterol” is really bad; it's thicker and more likely to block the blood vessels. So good diabetes management means effectively managing cholesterol levels and blood pressure, as well.

Now, to add further insult to injury, we learn that people with diabetes have an increased risk of depression. Depression is pretty common in the community anyway. Statistics vary, but it's generally accepted that approximately one in five people will experience depression at some time in their adult life; and research shows that having diabetes could double the risk. How depressing is that?

Well, maybe it's not so surprising. Living with any long term medical condition, often with the need for lifestyle and behaviour change, can really get you down. Of course, having so-called clinical depression is not the same as being moody or feeling sad and miserable just now and again. They're feelings we all get from time to time.

However, if you feel sad and miserable all or most of the time, if you've lost interest and enjoyment in life, if you have problems sleeping or if you're always feeling tired, you definitely need to check with your doctor because depression can be treated.

There are different forms of depression with different symptoms – and a number of different treatments. Many of these are explained on the *Depression* fact card which is available from pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Self Care health information and produced by the Pharmaceutical Society (www.psa.org.au). Successful treatment usually involves more than one form of therapy; general practitioners, psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors might all be involved; and medication can be very helpful.

Perhaps it might come as somewhat more of a surprise to learn that the reverse can apply; that is, people with depression could be at more risk of diabetes type 2 – the most common form of diabetes that affects around 85% of the more than one million Australians. Researchers at the University of Southampton in the UK reported an association between the use of antidepressants and diabetes, but acknowledged the study gave mixed results and no direct cause could be proved. It's been suggested that people with severe symptoms of depression may not take as much care of themselves as they should; they may be less physically active and therefore gain



Photo by Konrad Socha | sxc.hu

weight – a primary risk factor for type 2 diabetes. It is true many antidepressant medicines may cause weight gain and it's possible some may interfere with blood glucose control.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs at a specific time of year. Whether we have diabetes or depression or both, sunlight usually makes us feel better; and exposing our skin to the sun, at least for a while, does have definite health benefits. Ultraviolet radiation from the sun is necessary for the synthesis of vitamin D, that vitamin essential for (amongst other things) bone strength; and low vitamin D levels have been linked to diabetes.

Remember, however, sunshine in small doses is best; there is no benefit in prolonged exposure or, worse still, sunburn. If you need to, you can always top up your vitamin D requirements with a supplement. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice; and check out the Self Care Pharmacy fact cards. As well as *Depression* other titles include *Diabetes* and *Sense in the Sun*.