

Nerve Damage: One More Reason to Combat Diabetes

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It's estimated that one in five older Americans has diabetes. The most common form of the disease, type 2 diabetes, accounts for more than 90 percent of all diabetes diagnoses. Most diabetes complications are preventable if blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol are kept under control.

One of the less-often discussed complications of diabetes is nerve damage, or diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Some people have nerve damage but no symptoms, while others may have symptoms such as pain, tingling or loss of feeling in their feet, legs or hands. Diabetic peripheral neuropathy is most common in the feet and, if left untreated over time, may spread to the hands. Diabetes can also cause nerve damage in other parts of the body, including the heart, stomach and sexual organs. Some people with type 2 diabetes first learn they have the disease after developing the painful symptoms of neuropathy.

More than 60 percent of diabetics will develop some form of neuropathy. The nerve problems can begin

at any time, but the risk of neuropathy rises with age, how long the patient has had diabetes and a lack of effort to control the symptoms. It is important for diabetic patients to have their feet checked by a health care provider at least once each year.

In addition to performing a visual foot inspection, medical professionals should conduct a test to determine the patient's ability to sense pressure and touch. If a patient cannot sense pressure, he or she is at risk for developing foot sores. These sores may not heal properly and could lead to infection and, if untreated, amputation.

Sadly, some patients develop an even more painful type of diabetic peripheral neuropathy. In addition to foot and leg pain, they may be insensitive to pain or temperature or experience a burning sensation, cramps or sensitivity to touch. These symptoms are often worse at night. Most are preventable by controlling blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol.

Managing the Symptoms of Neuropathy

Patients who develop some of these symptoms develop should take extra precautions, including always wearing shoes or slippers for protection. Soft, thick socks decrease skin irritation, and foot cream can

soften thick, dry skin. A daily foot inspection, especially of the soles and between the toes, can help detect any problems before complications arise.

If you are a diabetic and want to get a better view of your soles, check your feet by placing a mirror on the floor. Shoes that allow your toes to move freely are also ideal, and it is important to break in new shoes gradually. Before putting shoes on, feel the insides with your hand to make sure they don't have anything in them that might disturb or injure your feet.

If you are diagnosed with diabetic neuropathy and experience pain, additional medications may help. These medications do not cure the condition but can decrease the pain. Discuss possible options with your physician or other health care provider.

For more information about diabetes and resources in your community, contact the American Diabetes Association toll-free at 1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383) or visit online at www.diabetes.org.

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Debunking Diabetes Myths

With so many illnesses and conditions affecting older adults, diabetes and its serious complications can often be overlooked. During the past year, the American Diabetes Association has led a campaign to educate Americans on the disease while debunking many myths and misconceptions.

Myth: If you are overweight or obese, you will eventually develop type 2 diabetes.

Fact: Being overweight is a risk factor for developing diabetes, but other risk factors such as family history, ethnicity and age also play a role. Unfortunately, too many people disregard the other risk factors for diabetes and think that weight is the only risk factor for type 2 diabetes. Most overweight people never develop type 2 diabetes, and many people with type 2 diabetes are at a normal weight or only moderately overweight.

Myth: Eating too much sugar causes diabetes.

Fact: No, it does not. Type 1 diabetes is caused by genetics and unknown factors that trigger the onset of the disease, and type 2 diabetes is caused by genetics and lifestyle factors. Being overweight does increase your risk for developing type 2 diabetes, and a diet high in calories, whether from

sugar or from fat, can contribute to weight gain. If you have a history of diabetes in your family, eating a healthy meal plan and regular exercise are recommended to manage your weight.

Myth: People with diabetes should eat special diabetic foods.

Fact: A healthy meal plan for people with diabetes is generally the same as a healthy diet for anyone – low in fat (especially saturated and trans fat) and moderate in salt and sugar, with meals based on whole grain foods, vegetables and fruit. Diabetic and “dietetic” foods generally offer no special benefit. Most of them still raise blood glucose levels, are usually more expensive, and can also have a laxative effect if they contain sugar alcohols.

Myth: People with diabetes are more likely to get colds and other illnesses.

Fact: You are no more likely to get a cold or other illness if you have diabetes. However, people with diabetes are advised to get flu shots. This is because any illness can make diabetes more difficult to control, and people with diabetes who do get the flu are more likely than others to go on to develop serious complications.

Myth: If you have type 2 diabetes and your doctor says you need to start using insulin, it

means you're failing to take care of your diabetes properly.

Fact: For most people, type 2 diabetes is a progressive disease. When first diagnosed, many people with type 2 diabetes can keep their blood glucose at a healthy level with oral medications. But over time, the body gradually produces less and less of its own insulin, and eventually oral medications may not be enough to keep blood glucose levels normal. Using insulin to get blood glucose levels to a healthy level is a good thing, not a bad one.

Myth: Fruit is a healthy food. Therefore, it is okay to eat as much of it as you wish.

Fact: Fruit is a healthy food, containing fiber and lots of vitamins and minerals. Because fruits contain carbohydrates, they need to be included in your meal plan. But you should talk to your dietitian about the proper amount, frequency and types of fruits you should eat.

Myth: Diabetes is not that serious a disease.

Fact: Diabetes causes more deaths each year than breast cancer and AIDS combined. Two out of three people with diabetes die from heart disease or stroke.

Source: American Diabetes Association