

Diabetes – not such a sweet disease

Diabetes is a condition where the body can't use glucose properly – usually because of a lack of insulin or so-called insulin resistance when the body fails to respond to its own insulin. Glucose is a particular type of sugar – it's essential for normal healthy body function; and insulin is the chemical messenger or hormone that controls the uptake of glucose by muscles, liver and fat tissues.

Diabetes is probably one of the first medical conditions described. Egyptian and Indian physicians as far back as 1500 BCE documented the sweetness and increased volume of urine associated with the disease. The name Diabetes mellitus (meaning from honey) was coined in the 1700s and it's not surprising that the condition became commonly known as "sugar diabetes".

There's no doubt excess consumption of sugar is an unhealthy habit; but concentrating on sugar alone could be counterproductive according to nutritionist Associate Professor Timothy Gill from the University of Sydney. Sugar added to processed foods, rather than natural sugars found in milk, fruit and grains, is more problematic, he said.

The Australian Diabetes Council (ADC) agrees that 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". Whilst no single nutrient is responsible for weight gain or loss, total kilojoule (or calorie) intake from all food certainly is.

Weight management is an essential part of diabetes management. And put simply, the cause of being overweight or obese is too much energy in, and too little energy out. That is too much food, too little exercise.

In fact, the underlying cause of obesity is much more complex, but the resulting problems of obesity are well known: not only type 2 diabetes, but also cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disease, social exclusion and low self esteem.

Worldwide, diabetes is fast reaching epidemic proportions. New data show that a staggering 350 million people are living with diabetes. In Australia, studies show that nearly one in four Australian adults either has diabetes or so-called impaired glucose metabolism which is associated with a substantial risk of diabetes and heart disease.

In type 2 diabetes, which accounts for about 85% of all people with diabetes, insulin is still produced but for some reason it doesn't 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 more young people are getting type 2 diabetes because more young people are getting fatter sooner.

Clearly achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is important; but being a 'big loser' with respect to weight doesn't mean your new lower weight will be easy to maintain. Australian research, published in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine has shown that, once we become overweight or obese, hormone changes reset what our body thinks is the 'normal' weight at this heavier level.

It is much easier, therefore, not to become overweight in the first place. And if you need to lose weight, take it slowly. According to the ADC website www.australiandiabetescouncil.com by losing just 5–7% of excess weight and participating in moderate intensity exercise for 150 minutes each week can reduce your risk of type 2 diabetes by more than 50%.

To increase awareness of diabetes, its associated problems, prevention strategies and available treatments, World Diabetes Day is celebrated each year on November 14. So, now's the time to become more diabetes aware.

You can get more advice on diabetes and how to maintain a healthy weight from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's health information. For the nearest location phone 1300 369 772 or log on to the Society's website at www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care and then Find a Self Care Pharmacy.