



By Rakesh K Sharma, MD, FACC, FACP, FSCAI

After a long, cold winter full of blankets, wooly sweaters and comfort food, spring is almost here: time to shed those bulky layers and extra pounds. March is National Nutrition Month – a great time to focus on good eating habits for good health.

Maintaining a healthy weight can reduce your risk of diabetes and, in turn, protect your heart. Just like smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, diabetes is a serious risk factor for heart disease.

People with diabetes have a greater risk of developing heart disease – and a diagnosis of diabetes brings a host of additional risk factors for your heart. Ongoing research indicates that diabetes and other chronic health conditions such as obesity, damage the structure and function of the heart. For example, people with diabetes may develop heart disease at a younger age than those without diabetes – as early as age 30. They also may have a more severe form of heart disease than who have not been diagnosed with diabetes. In fact, having Type 2 diabetes elevates the risk of heart attack or heart disease to the equivalent risk level of a person who has already suffered a heart attack.

Heart disease that develops in people with diabetes is referred to as diabetic heart disease (DHD). People with diabetes are two to four times as likely to have a heart attack or stroke. According to the American Heart Association, about three-quarters of people with diabetes die of some form of heart or blood vessel disease. The higher a person's blood sugar, the higher the risk level for DHD.

Typically, individuals with DHD will develop coronary artery disease, heart failure or diabetic cardiomyopathy – which damages the structure and function of the heart. Coronary artery disease involves the build-up of plaque inside the arteries, which reduces the flow of blood to the heart and increases the likelihood of blood clots. Coronary artery disease can cause angina (chest pain or discomfort), arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat), heart attack or death.

Heart failure, another consequence of diabetes, refers to the weakening of the heart muscle over time, until the heart cannot work efficiently and pump enough blood for the body's needs. Symptoms of heart failure include chronic tiredness and insufficient energy to participate in certain physical activities – a vicious cycle for a diabetic patient needing to stay active and lose weight.

Test your Diabetes Knowledge

Visit the Health Resources link on www.themedcenter.net to take an interactive quiz, Diabetes: Test Your Knowledge or the Type 2 Diabetes Risk Assessment.

Diabetes not only increases the risk of heart conditions, but also makes such conditions more difficult to treat. Certain heart disease treatments, such as a coronary bypass or angioplasty, are less successful in people with DHD.

Persons with diabetes can work with their physician to lower their risk of developing DHD through lifestyle changes and medications. Good lifestyle choices, such as a healthy diet and regular exercise, can control a number of risk factors – weight, blood pressure and cholesterol, all of which can reduce the risk of developing heart disease. If you already have diabetes, work with your physician to monitor and control your blood pressure (a reading below 130/80 mm Hg is desirable), cholesterol (an LDL or “bad cholesterol” reading below 100 is optimal) and blood sugar. One tool to help you measure how well you’re controlling your blood sugar is by measuring your hemoglobin A1c. This measurement estimates your average concentration of sugar in your blood over the past 4 months (120 days). The American Diabetes Association recommends a goal hemoglobin A1c of 7 percent or less for individuals with diabetes.

Your doctor may recommend an electrocardiogram while you walk on a treadmill, also called a stress test, which reveals the electrical activity of the heart while it is working. These tests can uncover abnormal rhythms and evidence of the lack of sufficient oxygen going to the heart muscle which may suggest a heart problem. These signs include chest pain; your heart pounding, racing or fluttering; problems breathing; a persistent feeling of weakness or tiredness; or unusual sounds when your doctor listens to your heartbeat. Your physician may order other tests, such as a stress echocardiogram, which uses sound waves to produce an image of the heart during a stress test.

It’s also a good idea to have regular cholesterol and blood pressure readings. The National Cholesterol Education Panel recommends cholesterol screenings for all adults over age 20 at least every five years, and more often (every 1-2 years) if you have high cholesterol or other risk factors for heart disease. Blood pressure readings are generally included as a standard part of your annual check-up.

February is National Heart Month, learn more about diabetes and your heart and the preventive steps you can take, or, if you already have diabetes, the steps you can take to minimize its health consequences. Visit the Health Resources link on our Web site at www.themedcenter.net to take an interactive quiz, Diabetes: Test Your Knowledge or the Type 2 Diabetes Risk Assessment. Or, call us today at 870-864-3245 for a information to help you set up a consultation with one of our health professionals about lifestyle recommendations to prevent or manage the condition.

Remember that this information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor, but rather to increase awareness and help equip patients with information to facilitate conversations with their physician.

About the Author: Dr. Rakesh Sharma is an interventional cardiologist of the Medical Center of South Arkansas. He is board certified in Cardiovascular Disease, Interventional Cardiology and Cardiovascular CT. Appointments available by calling 870-864-5540.

Sources: American Heart Association www.americanheart.org; National Institutes of Health, www.nih.gov; American Diabetes Association, www.diabetes.org

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