What is Diabetes?

Diabetes mellitus is a disease characterized by a disorder in metabolism in which glucose (sugar) levels are high in the blood due to an absence or abnormal use of the hormone insulin. These high blood sugar levels can cause serious complications such as eye, nerve, kidney and cardiac disease.

There are several different types of diabetic disorders. Ninety percent of the diabetic population has type 2, or non-insulin dependent diabetes, the onset of which usually occurs between age 30 and 40. People with type 2 diabetes may not produce sufficient insulin or have trouble using the insulin they produce. Because of the subtle symptoms, the disease may cause complications before it is even diagnosed. Early detection and treatment contribute to a healthy prognosis.

WHAT CAUSES DIABETES?

There are a number of risk factors that have been identified that can lead to the development of type 2 diabetes. Obesity is a major risk factor. Age, sex, a sedentary lifestyle combined with a high-fat, high-calorie diet, and family history all affect someone's chances of developing the disease. If you have any of these major risk factors and are feeling fatigued all the time, and/or have excessive thirst or urination, your doctor can check for diabetes with a simple blood test.

HOW TO CONTROL DIABETES

While there is no cure as yet for type 2 diabetes, daily treatment with a team approach by a doctor, RN, nutritionist and exercise therapist help control blood sugars. By lowering your blood sugars to as near normal levels as possible, you can prevent or reduce these serious complications. Under a doctor's supervision, treatment involves a combination of meal planning with weight loss goals, exercise, medication (if necessary) and monitoring your blood sugars consistently.

NUTRITION AND EXERCISE KEY

Two initial key ingredients to successfully treating type 2 diabetes are diet and exercise. A diabetic diet should:

- Maintain normal blood glucose levels.
- Achieve ideal weight.
- Balance food with insulin and activity.
- Include your favorite foods.

Exercise should incorporate the following goals:

- Improve the body's response to insulin and better control your blood sugars.
- Physically and emotionally improve your overall health and impart a sense of well-being.
- Increase your strength and ease of movement.
- Burn calories and help with weight reduction.

It is always desirable to seek nutritional and physiotherapist counseling to help set your own personalized goals for diet and exercise.

WHAT ABOUT MEDICATIONS?

Although there are basic common symptoms and treatments, diabetes is different for each person. The stages of care in diabetes therapy may change. At every stage you need a good, consistent meal plan and exercise regimen. You'll need to monitor your blood sugars. Moving to a new level of therapy if diet and exercise are not sufficient, you may require diabetic pills and/or insulin. The addition of medication can help you adjust your therapy to your changing needs. Your doctor and you can decide what medications are necessary for you to control your blood sugars and keep you healthy.

WHAT ABOUT SELF-EDUCATION?

A key concept to diabetic care is self-education concerning the disease, since a lifetime commitment to a healthy diabetic lifestyle is vital. Self-education resources include:

- Join the American Diabetes Association. This organization has many diabetic booklets concerning exercise, meal planning and medications that are helpful.
- Take a diabetic class at a local hospital.
- Surf the Internet for further information (use hospitals and university sites).
- Learn about monitoring your blood sugars and what the "numbers" mean.
- Above all, keep in touch with your doctor and your certified diabetic educator for any changes in your levels of care. Get concrete answers to your questions—don't settle for vague replies.

Information adapted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Publication No. 97-241 and Eli Lilly and Co., Managing Your Diabetes: Stages of Care *(1998).*

Compiled by Stella Koslosky, MBA, RN, CDE, a free-lance health writer and certified diabetic educator.

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The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your health care provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.