Diabetes: Myths & Facts

By: Dr Deepak Khandelwal

There are many myths about diabetes that make it difficult for people to believe some of the hard facts – such as diabetes is a serious and potentially deadly disease. These myths can create a picture of diabetes that is not accurate and full of stereotypes and stigma.

Following are the common facts about diabetes and learn how you can stop diabetes myths and misconceptions.

**Myth: Diabetes is not that serious of a disease.**

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

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

Fact: Being overweight is a risk factor for developing this disease, 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; 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), 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:** If you have diabetes, you should only eat small amounts of starchy foods, such as bread, potatoes and pasta.

*Fact:* Starchy foods are part of a healthy meal plan. What is important is the portion size. Whole grain breads, cereals, pasta, rice and starchy vegetables like potatoes, yams, peas and corn can be included in your meals and snacks. The key is portions. For most people with diabetes, having 3-4 servings of carbohydrate-containing foods is about right. Whole grain starchy foods are also a good source of fiber, which helps keep your gut healthy.

**Myth:** People with diabetes can't eat sweets or chocolate.

*Fact:* If eaten as part of a healthy meal plan, or combined with exercise, sweets and desserts can be eaten by people with diabetes. They are no more “off limits” to people with diabetes than they are to people without diabetes.

**Myth:** You can catch diabetes from someone else.

*Fact:* No. Although we don’t know exactly why some people develop diabetes, we know diabetes is not contagious. It can’t be caught like a cold or flu. There seems to be some genetic link in diabetes, particularly type 2 diabetes. Lifestyle factors also play a part.

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

*Fact:* You are no more likely to get a cold or another illness if you have diabetes. However, people with diabetes are advised to get flu vaccine. 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 ok to eat as much of it as you wish.**

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

**Myth: Diabetes is always inherited**

Fact: There does seem to be a genetic element to both Type 2 diabetes and obesity, which is why they can sometimes run in families. However, environmental factors, including diet and exercise, play a huge part in the development of both these conditions. It is important for everyone to eat healthily and exercise regularly to reduce the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes or obesity.

**Myth: Children can outgrow diabetes & Diabetes only affects the elderly**

Fact: Type 1 diabetes, also known as insulin-dependent diabetes, is usually diagnosed in childhood and is caused by the destruction of insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. As these cells cannot grow back once destroyed, this form of diabetes is life-long. Type 2 diabetes is uncommon in children, but the number is increasing. This type of diabetes is also life-long. Type 2 diabetes more usually develops in people who are over 35 years of age, with the incidence of Type 2 diabetes increasing throughout middle age.

**Myth: Diabetes is contagious**

Fact: Both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes are diseases of metabolism and are not contagious — you cannot contract diabetes by contact with a person with diabetes.

**Myth: Type 2 diabetes is less severe than Type 1 diabetes because you don’t need injections and you take tablets instead.**

Fact: While highly manageable, both the two main kinds of diabetes — Type 1 and Type 2 — may cause severe damage to future health if not managed properly. People with either type of diabetes are at risk of damage to their eyes, kidneys and feet as time goes on.
However, the risk of developing these complications can be greatly reduced with good control of blood glucose.

People with Type 2 diabetes have a shorter life span, as they are older at diagnosis and — without preventative measures — are at a higher risk of heart attacks. Due to the natural development of the condition, many people with Type 2 diabetes eventually require insulin treatment. If insulin is started early enough, many of the serious complications may be avoided. All people with diabetes should have regular checks of their eyes, feet, kidneys and heart so that any changes can be detected and treated.

**Myth: Type 2 diabetes can turn into Type 1 diabetes**

Fact: The type of diabetes a person has does not change with age. After a period of time, many people with Type 2 diabetes will require insulin injections to adequately control their blood glucose: insulin is a normal part of the treatment of Type 2 diabetes and does not reflect a change of diabetes type.

Type 1 diabetes develops quite differently and insulin injections are required from diagnosis. Type 1 diabetes that comes on in middle age or later can be slowly progressive, and can thus appear to be Type 2 diabetes. Also, some people with Type 1 diabetes can develop features of Type 2 diabetes (obesity, high blood fats, high blood pressure); these people will still need insulin injections, however, as they produce no insulin of their own.

**Myth: Type 2 diabetes is not always caused by lack of insulin because some people with diabetes don't need to take insulin.**

Fact: In Type 2 diabetes, the body has increased insulin needs due to the reduced responsiveness or insensitivity of body cells to insulin, and the pancreas cannot produce enough insulin to meet these increased needs of the body. The diet, exercise and drug treatments for Type 2 diabetes attempt to both overcome insulin insensitivity and to stimulate more insulin secretion. Ultimately, however, the ability to stimulate the cells of the pancreas to produce more insulin is not enough and insulin injections are usually needed to achieve good control of blood glucose.

**Myth: A high level of blood glucose is normal for some people.**
Fact: This is simply untrue. People with diabetes should always try and keep their level of blood glucose as close to the normal range as is possible and convenient. High levels of blood glucose lead to an increased risk of eye, heart, kidney and foot problems. Some people who have very high blood glucose levels for long periods will feel uncomfortable at normal levels, due to adaptations made by their brains — this effect can take some time to reverse.

**Myth: People with diabetes can estimate their blood glucose level without testing.**

Fact: Testing is the only reliable way to monitor blood glucose levels. However, it is possible to recognize the early signs of low blood glucose, such as increased heart rate, trembling, sweating, slow thinking or lack of concentration, and irritability. Any change in lifestyle or health that might disturb blood glucose control (up or down) should be followed by more careful blood glucose monitoring in order to prevent a possible low blood glucose episode (hypo) or failure to detect high levels. Training courses in how to recognize low blood glucose are available for people who have difficulty in recognizing hypo symptoms. People who attend these classes often realize how difficult it is to predict blood glucose levels without testing.

**Myth: I m diabetic, I need to stick on these points:**

- Completely avoid rice
- Completely avoid sugar and sugar products
- Say totally no to all underground vegetables like potato, sweet potato, Colocasia, beetroot and fruits like mango, banana, custard apple, sapota and grapes.

Fact- Rice and chapati contains same calories in the same amount (25gm= 85kcal). Only difference is in the glycemic index of two. Rice GI is high because of less fibre thus result in greater increase in blood sugar level, thus one can consume rice mixed with vegetables or can refer exchanges of cereals for the same.

Completely avoiding sugar and its products will result into habit of hiding and eating. This will result into involvement in the same activity keeping housemates in dark. Therefore diabetics can take sweet once in a week but at the same time housemates should keep a check on frequency and amount of sweet taken. Also it is advisable that modification is not a single man work, each and everyone should be involved, therefore it is better not to keep such items at home to prevent diabetics from eating too much.
Regarding fruits and vegetables restricted for diabetics, one should apply one golden rule: Decrease the frequency of the restricted food item with the decrease in amount. Therefore eat everything, but not in excess because everything even healthful becomes harmful when eaten in large amount.

**NOTE: Excess of Everything is Poison**

**Myth: Most of the people prefer drinking tea along with their meals which gives fullness in their diet**
Fact- Tea along with any food, decrease the absorption of nutrients because of the caffeine content, therefore should not be taken with diet. But Green tea has the lowest caffeine content (20-40mg/200ml) among teas. It therefore results in increased availability of other nutrients in food which are taken along with the tea. It also has Catechins, an antioxidant, exclusive to green tea, helps to prevent blood clots in the arteries. Therefore lowers the risk of heart problem; a complication of diabetes

**Myth: Diabetics cannot have tea?**
Fact- Diabetic people who like tea can opt for green tea but should refrain from adding milk, soy milk or non dairy creamer, since they reduce the positive effect of tea on insulin activity. One of the main antioxidant found in green tea, epigallocatechin 3 gallate (EGCG) has been found to be 100 times more effective than vitamin C.

**Myth: Do not eat when you have no appetite or you don’t feel hunger**
Fact- It is important to take small and frequent meals and plenty of fluids even when appetite is low. This will help in avoiding any condition of hypoglycemia.

**Myth: Only modification in diet brings change in blood sugar**
Fact- Intensive lifestyle modifications, attaining normal body weight, reducing the consumption of excessive intake of saturated fats and refined carbohydrates, 45-60 minutes of aerobic and work related activity, brings change in blood sugar.

**Myth: Skipping meals will help in weight loss and sugar control**
Fact- Skipping meals is no shortcut to weight loss or blood sugar control. Skipping meals or eating too little can cause low blood glucose. Spreading out food, especially carbohydrate-containing foods, over three meals each day (and snacks in between) helps in maintaining steady blood glucose levels. Also skipping meals is like skipping your medications. It causes erratic blood glucose values, making weight control difficult. Well controlled blood glucose helps manage appetite. Skipping meals often leads to overeating later, especially at evening meals.