

Greetings Family in Christ,

It has recently been brought to my attention that more than a few of us suffer from diabetes. It would be remiss on my part as a physician if I didn't at least attempt to help everyone understand this disease.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes occurs when a person's body doesn't make enough insulin or doesn't use insulin the right way. Insulin helps your cells convert blood sugar (also called glucose) into energy. Diabetes causes the sugar to build up in your blood.

Diabetes can generally be classified as type 1 or type 2. If you have type 1 diabetes, your body makes little or no insulin. If you have type 2 diabetes, your body makes some insulin but can't use it properly or doesn't make enough to control your blood sugar level. Most adults who have diabetes have type 2 diabetes.

What health problems can diabetes cause?

Over time, high blood sugar levels can damage your eyes, blood vessels, nerves and kidneys. Damage to your nerves can lead to foot sores, problems with digestion and impotence. Damage to your blood vessels increases your risk of heart attack and stroke. Many of these problems can be delayed or prevented with treatment.

How is diabetes treated?

The goal of diabetes treatment is to keep your blood sugar level as close to normal as possible--not too high (called hyperglycemia) or too low (called hypoglycemia).

The first step is to have a [healthy diet](#) and to [exercise](#). This may mean you'll need to change your diet and exercise habits. You'll also have to watch your weight, or even lose weight, to keep your blood sugar level as normal as possible. Your doctor will talk to you about the kinds of food you should eat and how much exercise you'll need every week.

Regularly checking your blood sugar is a key to helping you control it. Blood sugar checks can help you see how food, exercise and insulin or medicine affects your level. Checking your blood sugar also allows you and your doctor to change your treatment plan if needed.

Sometimes diet and exercise alone can't keep your blood sugar at a normal level. Then your doctor will talk to you about other treatments, such as medicine or [insulin](#).

Tips on eating right

- Eat at about the same time every day. This helps keep your insulin or medicine and sugar levels steady.
- Try to eat 3 times a day. Have a snack at bedtime if you're taking medicine or insulin. Avoid other snacking unless you're exercising or treating hypoglycemia.
- If you're overweight, lose weight. Even losing just a little weight, such as 5 to 15 pounds, can lower your blood sugar levels.

- Eat plenty of fiber. Green leafy vegetables, grains and fruits are good choices. Fiber helps you feel full and helps with digestion.
- Eat fewer "empty" calories, such as foods high in sugar and fat, and alcohol.

What about smoking and alcohol?

You should stop smoking as soon as possible. It's probably okay to drink some alcohol. But it's best not to have more than about 1 serving a day with a meal. A serving is 4 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor. If you drink on an empty stomach, you risk causing a drop in your blood sugar. Talk with your doctor about how much alcohol is safe for you to consume with your diabetes.

Will exercising help my blood sugar level?

Yes. Exercising is especially good for people who have diabetes because it can help the body better use insulin, resulting in a lower blood sugar level.

Exercise is also good for your heart, your cholesterol levels, your blood pressure and your weight--all factors that can affect your risk of heart attack and stroke.

Exercise also seems to make people feel better about themselves and feel less anxious.

Talk with your doctor about starting an exercise program. He or she can help you make a plan.

What is a glycosylated hemoglobin test?

The glycosylated hemoglobin test is a blood test your doctor may do. One common type of glycosylated hemoglobin is hemoglobin A1C. The hemoglobin A1c level shows how well your blood sugar has been controlled during the previous 1 to 3 months. It helps your doctor see how effective your current method of treatment is and decide if any changes are needed.

You should always get your doctor's approval before adding any supplements or vitamins to your daily regimen as they may interfere with your medications.

This may seem like a lot of information to digest all at once but keep in mind we are not alone in this struggle:

"For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength" ([New Living Translation](#), Phil. 4:13).

Sincerely in Christ,

Faith M. Crumpler, MD

Excerpted from "Living With Diabetes", written by the editorial staff of familydoctor.org, affiliated with the American Academy of Family Physicians.

<http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/diabetes/living/049.html>, Updated 05/08. Accessed 01/30/09.