

NEW TO TYPE 2 DIABETES?

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Being diagnosed with diabetes can be quite scary. Many people find out they have diabetes after routine testing and often this comes very much as a shock. Common reactions from people range from 'But I feel fine!' to 'Oh no, my life will never be the same again' and 'I am going to develop kidney failure soon'.

In this article, I hope to share with you some of the common things I feel that people should know and be aware of if they are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

Q I have just been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. What exactly is happening to me?

Type 2 diabetes is a complex disorder which is characterised by high blood sugars or hyperglycaemia. The main problem which arises in this condition is a combination of body insulin resistance and the body's inability to produce enough insulin to maintain proper function.

Insulin is a hormone released by the pancreas. It is released into the blood stream to enhance the absorption of sugar from the blood stream to the cells and helps produce energy and make building blocks for the body.

However, as the body ages, it becomes

less efficient in utilising insulin to produce energy. We call this state: body insulin resistance.

In this condition, more insulin is needed to do the same job. In the early stages of diabetes, this remains possible although the pancreas has to work doubly hard to produce more insulin in order to reduce blood sugars.

However, over time, the pancreas gradually gets exhausted and is unable to meet the demands of the body. As a result, the sugar levels in the blood start to rise and diabetes develops.

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Q I heard that people who have diabetes will go blind and have kidney failure. Is this true?

Although it is true that people with diabetes are at a greater risk of developing complications such as stroke, heart disease, eye and kidney disease, it is reassuring that many of these complications are preventable. The most important aspect of prevention is to make sure blood sugars are maintained well.

Q I have diabetes so does it mean I cannot eat the things I like to eat and cannot do the things I like to do anymore?

This is clearly untrue. However, upon saying that, it is not wise to continue living an unhealthy lifestyle. Take this point as a turning point in your life. The take-home message for anyone who is diagnosed with diabetes is this—do not panic.

It is a very common illness and it is very treatable. You still can do the things you like to do. There is no such thing as a diabetic diet. There is no such thing as a diabetic lifestyle. The lifestyle and diet recommended to anyone with diabetes is the same as anyone else: A healthy diet and a healthy lifestyle.

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There is no point being on a single tablet a day for diabetes but your blood sugar results remain very high and there are complications with eyes and feet!

Serious diabetes is when you have poor diabetes control and inadequate medications.

Q Can I change only my diet and lifestyle? I do not want to be on medications.

Possibly. However, less than one in six people can maintain their blood sugars to good levels with lifestyle and diet alone. Very often, medications are required. The most important thing is that your blood sugars are maintained.

Many patients come to me very worried that they are on many medications for their diabetes and, hence, feel that their diabetes is 'very serious'.

Serious diabetes is not the amount of medication you take but rather what your sugar levels are and whether you have complications related to diabetes or not.

There is no point being on a single tablet a day for your diabetes but your blood sugar results remain very high and there are complications with eyes and feet! In my opinion, that is serious diabetes: when you have poor diabetes control and inadequate medications.

In contrast, a person may be on many medications for diabetes but has good sugar control and no complications of the illness.

Many people think the treatment of diabetes is very 'easy'. Just click on any website and the same theme will appear. Eat less, exercise more and take your medications regularly. For people who have diabetes, it is clearly not so simple.

People are often concerned because they are not on the same medications as their relative or neighbour. They must be aware that it does not always mean that they are on the 'wrong' therapy. The treatment for any individual who has diabetes has to be individualised to each person.

So what do I do now?

Take this moment as a starting point in your life rather than the end. So, you have been diagnosed with diabetes. It is a very common condition and very treatable.

Make a change. Make a start towards healthy living. Change your diet to include more fruit, vegetables and fibre. You can still enjoy what you used to eat but moderation is the key.

Exercise more. Get more active. Exercising burns off more sugar and can help improve your diabetes control. Furthermore, it helps to reduce blood pressure and strengthen your heart. The best advice that I can give anyone who has just found out that they have diabetes is this: Whatever treatment you decide to go for (or not go for, in some cases), make sure that you balance your lifestyle and your treatment.

Live with it. Make sure that you learn to 'live with diabetes, not suffer from it'. Find and get the support you need. Very often, there are many people who have misconceptions about diabetes, even amongst family and friends. Bring them along to see your doctor or join support groups such as the Diabetes Support Group run by Diabetic Society of Singapore. You will find it a lot easier to live with diabetes if people around you understand and support you in what you are going through.

Find a doctor. It is, therefore, essential to find a doctor who understands you and your concerns. Discuss your concerns with him and ask him to help you design a treatment plan that is effective and acceptable to you.

Get yourself screened regularly. Make sure you have regular eye, urine and feet checks to identify early signs of diabetes complications. Normal health screening may not be enough as some of these tests are not included in basic health screening.

Very often, a balance will need to be sought between the lifestyle that one wishes to keep and the treatment that one may require.