HBA1c versus SBGM

Rathi d/o Jayabalan, diabetes nurse educator at DSS' South West Diabetes Education and Care Centre, sizes up the two tests to see which is better in glycaemic control.

Is it necessary to check your HbA1c, or is it sufficient just to do self-blood glucose monitoring (SBGM)? Many patients I see feel that it is sufficient to do either one. Some even tell me it is better to only do the HbA1c. When asked why, they answer, "It's more accurate", while others think that SBGM is sufficient for them to know their blood sugar levels. So which test is better for good glycaemic control?

The HbA1c is one blood test whose importance has been underestimated and misunderstood by those with diabetes. Over a period of two to three months, the test measures the amount of glucose that has attached to red pigment (haemoglobin) in the red blood cells. This happens whether one has diabetes or not. If your blood sugar level is higher, so is the HbA1c level, which subsequently increases the risk of complications. The test result accurately reveals the eating and exercise lifestyle pattern of the previous three months. Therefore, the HbA1c test is crucial because it helps predict one's risk for complications.

So is SBGM still necessary since HbA1c gives one the results needed? Yes, and there are many reasons why it is necessary.

It helps the patient and his diabetes-care team monitor the effectiveness of the treatment as well as his diet and exercise regime. From the results, the diabetes team is able to modify treatment and advise on adjustments in diet and exercise, if necessary.

There are other reasons such as detecting hypoglycaemia, unstable blood sugar levels and more importantly it helps the patient reach his blood sugar range target. During sick days, it is very important to do SBGM as there may be fluctuations in blood sugar levels, and low or high blood sugars can be addressed early. SBGM is especially important for ladies who are pregnant to ensure that an ideal blood sugar range is sustained.

SBGM helps to adjust one's lifestyle and treatment plans, but the information on the overall control is limited. HbA1C gives one an average blood sugar control over the past two to three months.

The verdict: both sets of data are therefore equally important as they help in total diabetes management.

At least 50% of all people with diabetes are unaware of their condition. In some countries this figure may reach 80%.

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