



# PROTECTING AGAINST DIABETES

**Regular exercise and healthy eating are the key to staying healthy and preventing diabetes**



**TAKE  
CHARGE  
OF YOUR  
HEALTH**

While most people peruse the holiday buffets at parties this month, Chaplain Diana Smith will stick to her pre-party ritual of filling up with healthy foods before heading out the door.

Smith has diabetes, and while it doesn't prevent her from attending the parties, it does keep her from snacking on unhealthy foods that can make her blood sugar soar.

For Smith controlling her diabetes so it doesn't control her was a personal choice made over 40 years ago. She grew up with a grandmother who had the disease and eventually became an amputee because of it.

Now Smith exercises routinely, eats healthy, controls her portions and keeps herself emotionally fit to keep her diabetes under control. While most would say they live with diabetes, Smith says she's a "person living well with diabetes."

Every 21 seconds another American is diagnosed with diabetes. Nearly 24 million people in the United States, or 8 percent of the population, have diabetes and of those, nearly 4 million are African Americans. It's estimated there are another 57 million Americans who suffer from prediabetes.

Even though the initial diagnosis can be frightening, diabetes is a very manageable disease if you get help early and learn how to properly manage it.

There are two types of diabetes, Type 1 and Type 2. Type 2, formerly known as "adult-onset" diabetes, is the predominant form among African Americans.

If left unchecked, both forms of diabetes can lead to serious complications, such as blindness, kidney damage, cardiovascular disease, lower-limb amputations and early death. The key to preventing these complications is early recognition by those most commonly at risk.

African Americans, the overweight and obese, and those with a family history of the disease are at a higher risk of developing diabetes. If you think you're at risk for the disease, you should look out for these symptoms:

- Excessive drinking and thirst
- Frequent urination, especially at night
- Unexplained weight loss
- Exhaustion or fatigue
- Increased hunger
- Wounds or sores that are slow to heal
- Blurred vision

Recently Dr. James Gavin, a leading diabetes scholar and president of Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, Ga., spoke at Lewis Chapel Baptist Church's Health Fair. He described how diabetes has become a "growing epidemic among the African-American community, and symptoms are often ignored because of the fear of going to the doctor."

When dealing with diabetic symptoms, "the first thing you have to do is find a way of dealing with your fear because you can't do this by yourself," says Gavin. "A head-in-the-sand approach gets you into a lot of trouble."

Diabetes affects one out of every 10 African Americans. And while the numbers are important, Gavin says our focus should be more on the staggering impact diabetes has on individuals.

"Diabetics have earlier and more severe heart attacks, which constitute the leading cause of death. Diabetics comprise 13 percent of the population but 33 percent of the population that requires dialysis or kidney transplantation. Those are the things we need to worry about," says Gavin.

Since diabetes can go undetected for several years before symptoms occur, it's imperative to recognize the signs quickly and get help. Doctors can check people for diabetes through a simple blood test that looks at your glucose levels. Within minutes, doctors are able to discover whether or not you have diabetes, then start you on a treatment plan immediately. Those who get help early are less likely to suffer from the major complications caused by diabetes.

Now 40 years after her initial diagnosis, Smith admits she's extremely blessed to have avoided the ill effects of diabetes. Aside from mild heart disease and the subsequent cardiac catheterization she recently underwent, she considers herself "so blessed that the diabetes was caught early and kept under control."

"With diabetes it's just a matter of balance in your lifestyle. If you want to eat your favorite foods, you have to limit the portions and learn to balance your sugar intake with exercise," she says. "Even mild diabetes is still diabetes. If you don't take control and start living and eating better, you're going to suffer in the long run."

Smith's diabetes is so much under control now that she rarely has to visit the doctor because of it. She encourages others who recognize symptoms in themselves or family members to get help quickly. Smith's fast reaction to the disease and her ability to get it under control through exercise, diet and insulin are the reasons she leads a normal lifestyle today.

If you'd like information on classes and free diabetes screenings offered through Better Health of Cumberland County, call Melissa at (910) 483-7534.