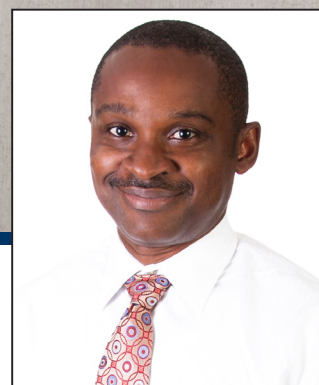


TAKE CHARGE of your HEALTH



The Complications of Diabetes

Nearly 26 million Americans have diabetes, yet don't understand the complications that may come with the disease. Nduche Onyeaso, M.D., an endocrinologist with Cape Fear Valley Diabetes and Endocrine Center, warns that improperly controlled diabetes can lead to some serious complications, especially for African Americans.

Diabetes is a metabolic disease that causes high blood sugar, either because the pancreas does not produce enough insulin or because the body does not properly respond to the insulin that is created.

High blood sugar puts one at risk for developing problems with other body functions, including kidney, nerve, feet and eye problems. High blood pressure, stroke, sexual dysfunction and skin infections are also possible complications of diabetes. Diabetic foot infections can become so severe they require limb amputation.

The problem is more serious for the African American community.

"There is an increased prevalence of diabetes in the African American community," said Dr. Onyeaso. "Approximately one in 12 Americans has diabetes, and for every six Caucasians with diabetes, approximately 10 African Americans have it.

"Studies show that eating healthy, exercising at least 30 minutes a day, five times a week and a weight loss of seven percent of one's body weight can help reduce the progression of diabetes," said Dr. Onyeaso.

Dr. Onyeaso says that diabetes can affect both the large and small blood vessels in the body. Macro-vascular (large blood vessel) problems put diabetics at risk for heart attack and stroke.

"When you have diabetes, most times you also have high cholesterol," Onyeaso said. "When cholesterol is deposited into the blood stream, it can cause blockages in blood vessels supplying the heart and brain." This can lead to heart attack and stroke.

Micro-vascular (small blood vessel) problems can affect everything from your eyes to your kidneys to your lower extremities.

Small blood vessels can leak blood in the back of the eyes and cause severe visual impairment. This is called Diabetic Retinopathy.

"I recommend patients with diabetes have their eyes checked annually so that the progression toward blindness can be prevented," said Dr. Onyeaso.

Patients with diabetes should also have their kidney function checked at least once a year, as the micro-vessels can leak protein into the urine, affecting the kidneys. Over time, this can cause the kidneys to fail, leading to dialysis.

A healthy diet and blood pressure medications called ACE inhibitors, such as lisinopril, can help reduce this progression.

Those who let their diabetes go out of control may experience what's known as Diabetic Neuropathy. Put simply, neuropathy is the numbness, tingling or pain that diabetic patients may feel in their limbs, particularly their legs.

"This is worse in patients who smoke," said Dr. Onyeaso. "Patients with diabetes should not smoke. It also increases their chances of having heart attacks and amputations."

Those who have diabetes can prevent complications, however. Dr. Onyeaso says the control lies in the hands of the patient.

"We, the physicians, can prescribe medications, but what you do at home will help control your blood sugars," he said. "If you take your medications regularly, eat right and exercise, your blood sugars are likely to be controlled and you will be as healthy as anyone out on the street."

But Dr. Onyeaso cautions that if you don't do this, and let your diabetes go uncontrolled, you will have a lifespan that is much shorter than the normal population.

If you have diabetes, or you have a family history of diabetes, make changes toward a healthier lifestyle. Eat minimally processed foods. Exercise regularly. Keep your blood sugars under tight control. Have your doctor check your kidney function at least annually. And see an eye specialist every year. Take charge of your health and make a real difference in your quality of life.



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