



Diabetes and Asian Americans

Diabetes mellitus is a serious chronic disease that affects an estimated 16 million people in the United States. Asian Americans have been identified as a high risk group for developing diabetes and suffering from its complications. Studies show that diabetes is more prevalent in Asian American men than in Caucasian men, and equally as prevalent in Asian American and Caucasian women.¹

Diabetes affects the way the body uses food. Most foods are broken down into glucose, a sugar needed for energy. The pancreas produces a hormone called insulin to process the glucose. For people with diabetes, glucose is not processed properly, so it builds up to an abnormally high level. This state of high blood glucose (blood sugar) levels is called hyperglycemia.

There is no single cause of diabetes, making the need for Asian Americans to learn about risk factors extremely important. Left untreated, diabetes can lead to blindness, kidney disease, heart disease, lower limb amputations, sexual dysfunction, and nerve damage.

The three main categories of

diabetes are type 1, type 2, and gestational diabetes. Asian Americans living with any type of diabetes must manage the disease carefully to avoid or prevent serious complications.

Type 1 Diabetes

In type 1 diabetes, the body destroys the cells that make insulin. Type 1 usually develops in children and young adults. Symptoms include frequent urination, constant hunger and thirst, weight loss, blurry vision, and fatigue. People with type 1 diabetes require daily insulin injections so that their bodies can use glucose for energy. A small number of Asian Americans have type 1 diabetes.

Type 2 Diabetes

Most Asian Americans with diabetes have type 2, which is the most common form of the disease.² In type 2, the pancreas makes insulin, but the body cannot use it as it should. Risk factors such as obesity can cause insulin resistance. Symptoms of type 2 diabetes include fatigue, blurry vision, extreme hunger and thirst, frequent infections that are slow to heal, and dry, itchy skin. Healthy eating and regular physical activity are important ways of controlling type 2 diabetes.

The Facts . . .

About 750,000 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have diabetes.³

Over half of Asian American women and men do not exercise, putting them at high risk for diabetes.⁴

Over 25% of Asian Americans have high cholesterol, which can lead to obesity, a risk

Gestational Diabetes

Gestational diabetes develops or is first noticed during pregnancy. It usually disappears after pregnancy, but women who have had gestational diabetes are at increased risk for developing type 2 diabetes later in life. Asian Indian and Filipino women have among the highest gestational diabetes rates in the country.⁶

The burden of diabetes in the United States is increasing and all Asian Americans need to be aware of ways to prevent and control this

¹ NCHS, CDC, 1986-1990 National Health Interview Survey, U.S. Public Health Service.

² National Diabetes Education Program, "Diabetes and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Fact Sheet," 1999.

³ Office of Financial Management, State of Washington, 1999.

⁴ American Heart Association, "Asian/Pacific Islanders and Cardiovascular Diseases: Biostatistical Fact Sheet," 1999.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ CDC, "Diabetes During Pregnancy - United States, 1993-1995," *MMWR* 47, 1998.