**November: National Diabetes Month**

National Diabetes Month is observed every November to raise awareness about diabetes risk factors, demonstrate the disease’s impact on millions of Americans, and encourage people to make healthy lifestyle changes. I feel very privileged to write about diabetes during National Diabetes Month because I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age nine. Awareness of diabetes was very limited when I was a child, as were resources available for diabetics. For years, I had to inform classmates and teachers that diabetes is not contagious. I had to actively educate my community about diabetes and how to positively support juvenile diabetics. I hope this article is successful in inspiring conversation and awareness of diabetes in our Good Sam Gwinnett community because it affects so many of our patients, friends, and family members. We estimate that 25% of our uninsured patient population lives every day with the human and economic costs associated with diabetes.

**What is Diabetes?**

Most consumed foods are converted into glucose, a form of sugar, which our bodies use for energy. The pancreas, an organ located near the stomach, produces a hormone called insulin that helps the cells take in glucose to be used for energy. A diabetic person’s body either doesn’t produce enough insulin or cannot use the insulin it produces as well as it should. The result of this is a buildup of excess sugar in their blood cells and a shortage of energy from glucose in their other cells. The most common types of diabetes are Type 1, Type 2, and gestational diabetes. The bodies of Type 1 diabetics do not produce insulin. Thus, all Type 1 diabetics need to inject additional insulin. The bodies of Type 2 diabetics still produce insulin, but do not respond as expected to the insulin their pancreases create. This form of diabetes can typically be controlled through exercise, diet, monitoring blood sugars, and oral or injected medication on an as-needed basis. Gestational diabetes develops in two to five percent of all pregnancies and usually disappears after the baby is born. Women diagnosed with gestational diabetes also have an increased likelihood of developing Type 2 diabetes.

**The Cost of Diabetes**

*Diabetes: Growing Epidemic*

* More than **30 million** Americans have diabetes. This accounts for **1 in 11** Americans.
* **84 million** Americans have prediabetes; of this population, **90%** of them don’t know they are at-risk or already have diabetes.
* Someone in the United States is diagnosed with diabetes every **21 seconds.**

*Human Costs*

* African Americans and Hispanics are **50%** more likely to have diabetes than non-Hispanic whites.
* People with diabetes are at greater risk of **heart disease, stroke, eye problems, kidney disease, dental disease, nerve damage, and foot problems** due to medical complications associated with diabetes.
* Diabetes is the **7th** leading cause of death in the United States.

*Economic Costs*

* Health care costs for Americans with diabetes are **2.3x greater** than those without diabetes.
* People with diabetes who are uninsured have **168%** more emergency department visits than insured individuals.
* People with diagnosed diabetes incur average medical expenditures of **$16,752** per year, of which approximately **$9,601** is attributed to diabetes.
* Diagnosed diabetes costs America **$327 billion** per year; this figure includes **$237 billion** in direct medical costs and **$90 billion** in reduced productivity.
* The cost of insulin **tripled** between 2002 and 2013 and **doubled** in price between 2012 and 2016.
* Insulin is the **6th** most expensive liquid in the world; one gallon of insulin costs **$9,400**.

**Ways You Can Support Others Living with Diabetes**

With the prevalence of diabetes in the United States, it is very likely you know someone with diabetes. A friend or family member of yours may even have diabetes. As a diabetic, this is what I want the people close to me to do to support me:

* *Educate Yourself*. There are many pervasive and toxic myths about diabetes, such as that people with diabetes cannot eat sugar, that diabetes is contagious, or that only overweight people are affected by diabetes. To positively show support and care for diabetics, learning to separate fact from fiction with regards to diabetes is a pivotal first step. Learning the symptoms associated with blood sugar extremes will also help you to better understand diabetics. Diabetics experiencing hyperglycemia (elevated blood sugar levels), for instance, may experience trouble concentrating, headaches, fatigue, or confusion. Hypoglycemia (low blood glucose levels) can cause shakiness, dizziness, hunger, and depressive or anxious thoughts. Recognizing these symptoms will help you become a stronger diabetes ally.
* *Ask*. Diabetic blood sugar fluctuations are inevitable. If you know someone has diabetes, ask how you can help them during a recognizable hyperglycemic or hypoglycemic episode rather than assuming. Unless you are a medical professional, it is more damaging than it is helpful to assume you know how to handle extreme blood sugar episodes based solely on what you have heard about diabetes. The diabetics are the subject matter experts on their diabetes and are best equipped to communicate what they need from you during hyperglycemic or hypoglycemic episodes.
* *Know When to Step Back.* Diabetes management is ultimately up to the diabetic. Scolding, nagging, or second-guessing the diabetic’s care plan is more damaging than it is helpful and can result in the diabetic feeling condescended to, even if the input is well-intended.
* *Encourage.* Diabetes management is a full-time job of counting carbohydrates, checking blood sugar levels, self-regulating stress levels, taking medications, and exercising regularly. Encourage a healthier lifestyle by walking with them through their life journey – offer to exercise with them and suggest eating out at restaurants with a strong selection of healthy foods. Management of diabetes is a constant stressor, so showing your willingness to share the burden of diabetes by living a healthier life with them makes them feel valued.
* *Help Ease Stress*. Too much stress negatively impacts blood sugar levels in diabetics. Diabetes management itself is a stressor, so encourage diabetics in your life to talk about their feelings and frustrations. Help them feel validated when they are struggling with their diabetes management because feeling heard is incredibly meaningful.

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