

Get a handle on your health

DEALING WITH DIABETES IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

By Dorene E. Carter, PhD, RD

For all the talk about disease prevention, African Americans are still paying a higher price than other ethnic groups, when it comes to dealing with diabetes.

Just the other day, I overheard a young woman asking a friend how was his uncle, the one with diabetes. "He just got out of the hospital," her friend answered. "His leg had to be amputated."

"Oh, no! That diabetes is a trip!" the young girl muttered. She had seen it all too often.

"What if?" I thought to myself. What if this person had gotten an early diagnosis? What if he had had adequate insurance? What if he could have afforded the necessary medications and doctor visits? What if he had had the opportunity to receive medical nutrition therapy from a qualified dietitian? What if someone had effectively communicated to him the importance of a healthy diet and exercise? What if... Would it have made a difference?

Chances are, like so many other African Americans, this gentleman did not have health insurance. And if he did, it would not have covered medical nutrition therapy, despite the fact that diet is perhaps the most crucial factor in the control of diabetes. And, chances are, also, that he did not have enough money to fill his prescriptions, nor to get the right foods.

I use this account because I think it is a clear example of what is happening in the African American community, and it is time for a change.

It is time for all of us to understand that diabetes is often preventable, and definitely treatable. It does not have to lead to the tragic events that happen to so many African Americans.

But to turn the tide, we will have to become more proactive. We have to play a bigger role in our own health care. We can no longer be bystanders. We have to act.

I offer the following suggestions as a starting point:

- ❖ **Talk to your doctor about your risks.** If you are African American, you are at higher risk than your white counterpart. If you are over the age of 45, have a close relative who has been diagnosed with diabetes, or if you ever developed diabetes during pregnancy, you are at high risk. You have a right to know your risks, and what you can do about them.
- ❖ **Have your blood sugar tested regularly.** It is important to know your blood sugar level, so that you can take steps to control it.
- ❖ **Eat a healthy diet.** Anyone who has been diagnosed with diabetes should be referred to a registered dietitian for medical nutrition therapy. The dietitian can help you plan a healthy diet that takes your personal and cultural food preferences into account.
- ❖ **If you are overweight, lose weight.** Obesity is a major factor in the onset of diabetes and its complications. Losing a few pounds can result in significant improvements in your health.
- ❖ **Exercise regularly.** Exercise helps the body to use glucose more efficiently, and makes it easier to control blood sugar. It is also a good way to manage your weight.

Dr. Dorene Carter is a registered and licensed dietitian with more than 25 years of experience in the field of nutrition. She received her doctorate in nutrition from the University of California, and has enjoyed an illustrious career as an educator, counselor, and author. She is President and CEO of the CHANA Project, and a professional nutrition consultant.

For more information on dealing with diabetes, write drdorene@dailydietguide.com. Your questions, comments, and personal stories are always welcome.

Ask Dr. Dorene

Dear Dr. Dorene

Recently, I have been under a lot of stress in my life. I find myself bingeing and purging. I don't think I am bulimic, but I am afraid that if I continue doing what I am doing, it could get to be quite serious. What should I do to make sure that it doesn't get any worse?

Answer. A lot of people turn to food when stressed. This could lead to unhealthy behaviors and serious health consequences. I am glad that you recognize the potential problem that bingeing and purging could cause and are willing to do something about it from now.

Of course, if stress is driving you towards this unhealthy eating pattern, you will need to get to the source of the stress and find other ways to deal with it. Talking things out with a counselor, a trusted relative or friend, or a pastor may prove to be quite helpful. You might also want to talk to a registered dietitian about making healthy food choices, so that when you do gorge, you don't feel the guilt and shame that often leads to induced vomiting and bulimia.

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