



STRIKING A BALANCE

MYTHS about diabetes might go to extremes, but the facts about the condition are much more sensible

If I had a dollar for every time someone apologized for passing food to me at a party, I'd never have to work again.

I have type 2 diabetes, and I'm often surprised by how little people really know about the

By Amy Lynn Smith

condition. They think I shouldn't eat any carbohydrates ("Are you allowed to have that?") or wonder if I'm going to go blind.

Fortunately, my doctors are far more enlightened, thanks to an ever-improving understanding of diabetes and its treatment—especially in the past 20 years since I was diagnosed.

"I think the most important thing that has changed—the thing doctors are really trying to communicate to their patients—is the absolute necessity of controlling blood glucose levels," says Larry Deeb, M.D., president of medicine and science for the American Diabetes Association. "If patients do that, we can prevent the complications of diabetes."

Although some of the myths about diabetes may be a bit extreme, experts agree that the key to living well with diabetes is balance.

MYTH: Diabetes is all about what you eat.

People with diabetes do need to adhere to a healthy diet. But they also need to follow any prescribed medication regimen and get regular exercise.

"I think the most important thing is to commit to being active every day," Deeb says. "It doesn't mean having to go to the gym every day. Any intentional activity, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking at the far end of the parking lot, is beneficial."

Balancing Act

Managing diabetes is all about balance and moderation. If you or someone you love has diabetes, you can learn more about the disease—including information about recent research—on the American Diabetes Association's website, diabetes.org.

THE HEARTFELT TRUTH

When people don't effectively manage their diabetes, one of the most common complications is cardiovascular disease.

Larry Deeb, M.D., president of medicine and science for the American Diabetes Association (ADA), says people with diabetes can reduce their risk of heart disease by paying close attention to the "ABCs" of diabetes:

- ♦ **A is for A1c.** This blood test measures blood glucose control over the past two to three months. The ADA's recommended target for people with diabetes is below 7 percent.
- ♦ **B is for blood pressure.** When your blood pressure is high, your heart has to work harder than it should. The ADA recommends that people with diabetes keep their blood pressure below 130/80 mmHg.
- ♦ **C is for cholesterol.** Cholesterol is a fatlike substance—only some of which is actually bad for you—in your blood. The ADA recommends target HDL ("good") cholesterol levels above 40 mg/dL for men and above 50 mg/dL for women, and LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels below 100 mg/dL.

MYTH: Eating sugar causes diabetes—and people with diabetes should never eat sugar.

Diabetes is not caused by eating sugar. It's a condition in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin, which can cause high blood glucose, or blood sugar, levels if not managed effectively.

Also contrary to popular belief, people with diabetes can enjoy sweets and other foods containing sugar as part of a healthy meal plan. "One cookie isn't going to kill you," says Cathy Nonas, R.D., M.S., CDE, an American Dietetic Association spokeswoman.

"There has to be a balance," Deeb adds. "You can enjoy a piece of cake on your birthday, but remember it's someone's birthday every day. So enjoy life, but in moderation."

MYTH: People with diabetes have to follow a strict diet and can't eat the same things everyone else does.

"A diabetes diet is pretty much the same as any diet that's good for you," Nonas says. This means eating plenty of vegetables, along with healthy portions of whole grains, low-fat meats and fish, plus small amounts of fresh fruit.

No single eating plan is perfect for everyone with diabetes, she adds, because every person's body can respond differently to various foods. Frequent blood glucose monitoring can help people better understand how their bodies react to certain foods so they can make more-educated food choices.

MYTH:

If you're predisposed to diabetes, there's nothing you can do to prevent or delay its onset.

Some people are, in fact, predisposed to diabetes. On the other hand, Deeb says, people who are willing to exercise three or four times a week, eat a healthy diet and maintain an appropriate weight may be able to put off the development of type 2 diabetes for years, if not altogether.

MYTH:

Living with diabetes is hard work.

Although effective diabetes management requires effort, the right attitude can turn it into something positive.

"We know that regular physical activity, maintaining a healthy weight and eating a healthy diet all improve blood glucose control," Nonas says. "But people shouldn't look at this as a punishment—it's an opportunity to improve your health."

MYTH:

If you haven't always managed your diabetes effectively, getting it under control now won't do any good.

This is absolutely false, Deeb says. Those living with diabetes can have days or even longer periods when they struggle to maintain their balance. But that doesn't mean they should stop trying.

"It's the long-term commitment that counts," he explains. "Even people who have started to develop complications can reverse those trends by improving their lifestyles. And it's never too late to get back to it." ■

