

Taking the bite out of diabetes

Australians very rarely need encouragement to have a bite to eat. Indeed it's quite clear that most of us eat too much, too often. Statistics indicate that we are fast becoming the most overweight nation in the world, and being overweight or obese means considerably more health problems such as arthritis, heart disease and diabetes.

It might seem strange, therefore, that Diabetes Australia, the charitable organisation caring for all people with diabetes, is suggesting once again that we get together for a bite – in fact, the annual April “Great Australian Bite” (GAB). Actually this is the 7th year Diabetes Australia has been promoting the GAB fest throughout Australia to raise funds for research into, and education about, diabetes. The aim is to bring together family, friends or workmates for food and refreshment. It could be something really simple like a morning or afternoon tea; or something slightly more substantial: breakfast, lunch, dinner or a late night supper. No occasion is too large or too small. It could be just a few drinks after work on Friday night, or maybe a weekend barbecue, perhaps even a birthday bash. Equally important as raising funds is raising awareness of the fastest growing chronic disease in the world.

Every day more than 200 Australians are newly diagnosed with diabetes. Already it is estimated that there are more than 3 million people in Australia with diabetes or so-called pre-diabetes. That is, about one in four Australian adults either has diabetes or their ability to deal with glucose is impaired.

People with diabetes are almost three times more likely to have high blood pressure, to be overweight, or have elevated blood fats (i.e., raised levels of cholesterol and triglyceride in the blood). As a result major complications of diabetes are heart disease and stroke, eye disease resulting in blindness, kidney failure, limb amputation and impotence in men.

Diabetes is classified as either type 1 or type 2 diabetes. Type 1 diabetes usually occurs in childhood or young adulthood. It is thought to occur when the body's immune system attacks and destroys the insulin producing cells in the pancreas gland. Daily insulin injections are required for effective management.

Type 2 diabetes most often occurs in adults over the age of 45 but is increasingly occurring at a younger age. Type 2 diabetes, which represents the vast majority of all cases, occurs when the pancreas is not producing enough insulin or when the insulin is not working effectively.

Pre-diabetes is a condition when glucose levels are higher than normal but not yet high enough for a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes. In addition to the increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, people with pre-diabetes are more likely to have a heart attack or stroke. As yet there is no cure for diabetes. However, several large studies have shown that preventing or delaying the onset of diabetes is possible in those people at risk.

Medicines are an important part of diabetes management, but first and foremost lifestyle changes are necessary. In US and Finnish studies, best results in preventing diabetes were obtained with SNAP programs - that's attention to smoking, nutrition, alcohol and physical activity. We should aim for moderate exercise for 30 minutes on at least 5 days a week, limited alcohol intake – no more than 4 standard drinks daily for men or 2 for women, cessation of smoking, maintenance of a healthy body weight and sensible eating (with limited fats, salt and sugar).

Why not start your sensible eating with a fund raising snack?

You can get details about the GAB and sign up online at www.greataustralianbite.com.au and for more information about how diabetes might affect you and your family ask for the fact cards available from all Self Care pharmacies.

Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.