

Better Than Medicine

More than 16 million people in the United States have diabetes, and type 2 diabetes accounts for up to 95% of all cases. More than 80% of those with the disease are overweight. Inactivity, family history, and racial or ethnic background are all considered risk factors. Compared to white adults, blacks have a 60% higher rate of type 2 diabetes and Hispanics have a 90% higher rate.

In type 2 diabetes, the body becomes increasingly resistant to the effects of insulin, a hormone that allows glucose--the sugar in food--to be converted into usable energy for the body. High blood sugar levels damage blood vessels and decrease blood flow throughout the body over time, leading to heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, limb amputations, and new-onset blindness in adults.

The lifestyle changes tried in the study not only reduced disease risk by 58% as compared with a placebo but also were more successful than the prescription drug metformin (Glucophage). In people who only received the drug and not the lifestyle changes, the risk was only lowered by 31%.

Results for the elderly were even more dramatic. The study showed that metformin was unable to reduce their risk of getting diabetes, while changing their lifestyle reduced their risk by a whopping 71%.

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Diabetes and Beyond

The implications of the study go far beyond diabetes. "In terms of preventing chronic illnesses and promoting health, I think this is very promising," says Teresa Juarbe, RN, PhD, a researcher at the University of California, San Francisco. Juarbe is working to create a lifestyle intervention study that will try to improve the heart health of older Hispanic women. "The question now is, how can we translate this into clinical practice and managed care?" Juarbe says.

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Most healthcare settings don't employ dietitians, much less ones trained to help people make significant changes in their lifestyles. But the \$100 billion a year being spent in this country to treat diabetes alone may soon change that.

Researchers are now looking to recruit 5,000 individuals with type 2 diabetes to undergo lifestyle interventions to prevent heart attack and stroke. People with diabetes interested in signing up for the Look AHEAD study can find more information at www.lookaheadstudy.org.

Camille Mojica Rey is a freelance medical writer.

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Source: CBSHealthWatch
Copyright: © 2001 Medscape, Inc.
Posted On Site: Sep. 2001
Publication Date: Sep. 2001

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