Don’t Wait Until It’s Too Late!

In Nova Scotia, more than 80,000 people live with Diabetes Mellitus. About 5 to 10% of these people have type 1 diabetes, and the other 90 to 95% have type 2 diabetes.

No matter what type of diabetes you have, or how you are being treated (insulin, diabetes pills, or diet and exercise alone), the complications of diabetes are very real and can affect you.

The complications of diabetes can be devastating. Kidney and nerve disease affect a large number of people with diabetes. The good news is that long-term studies have shown that having very good control of your diabetes reduces your risk of developing complications.

The first step to preventing complications such as kidney and nerve disease is to find and treat problems as early as possible. Take an active role in your care!

KIDNEY DISEASE

Kidneys are a pair of kidney bean-shaped organs that lie on either side of your back near the base of the rib cage. Their main task is to remove waste products from the blood. Diabetes, high blood glucose, high blood pressure, and smoking can all weaken the small vessels and filters (glomeruli) within the kidney. Over time, the kidneys may fail to work, causing waste (toxins) to build up in the body.

Diabetic kidney disease (often referred to as diabetic nephropathy) can develop in as many as 30% of people with type 1 diabetes and 10 to 40% of those with type 2 diabetes. Diabetic kidney disease is the leading cause of new cases to dialysis. Dialysis is a treatment to clean the blood when the kidneys can no longer do the work.

Prevention Tips:

1. **Have your urine and blood checked** for early signs of kidney problems and to see if kidneys are working well. For those with type 2 diabetes, testing should be done at time of diagnosis and then annually. For people with type 1 diabetes, screening should start no later than 5 years after diagnosis.

2. **Have your blood pressure checked at each visit** with your doctor or health care provider (HCP). Write your result on your blood pressure card and learn your blood pressure target. Most people with diabetes should keep it less than 140/80 mmHg. Many people need medication to reach their blood pressure target. Talk to your doctor or HCP about these medications and which ones might work for you.

3. **If you smoke, quit! If you don’t smoke, don’t start!** Smoking may injure the small blood vessels of the kidney and speed up hardening of the arteries.

4. **Ask your HCP about a sick day medication list.** This should tell you which pills NOT to take when you are very ill (dehydrated).

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NERVE DISEASE

Nerve disease (often referred to as diabetic neuropathy) affects 40 to 50% of people with diabetes. High blood glucose over time damages the vessels that carry blood and nutrients to the nerves. This, in turn, causes damage to the nerves. As nerves are widespread throughout the body, nerve disease can cause the following:

- Tingling, pain, burning, and numbness in your feet, legs, and hands. These symptoms may often be worse at night.
- Foot problems due to an inability to feel pain or discomfort from an injury and/or poorly fitting shoes.
- Sexual dysfunction (impotence in men; vaginal dryness and decreased sensation in women).
- Difficulty digesting your food (complaints of fullness, bloating, poor appetite, and unexplained diarrhea/constipation).
- Problems with your blood pressure (it may go too low when you get up quickly causing dizziness and weakness).

As a number of these symptoms can have other causes, it is important to report these symptoms to your doctor or HCP and discuss ways they can be reduced.

Prevention Tips:

1. **Become aware of the signs and symptoms** of diabetes complications, and report all of them to your doctor or HCP.

2. **See your doctor or HCP on a regular basis** for assessment of your diabetes. This assessment may include electrocardiograms, exercise stress tests, testing of blood pressure, blood glucose, blood fats, screening for sexual dysfunction and checking of your feet.

3. Limit the use of **alcohol**.

Reducing Your Risk of Developing Diabetes Complications:

- **Learn as much as you can.** Talk with members of your diabetes healthcare team about steps you can take to lower your risk.

- **Don’t wait for the signs and symptoms to develop.** Have regular and routine tests for the presence of diabetes complications.

- **Aim for good control** of your diabetes (blood glucose, blood pressure, and blood fats). Check your blood glucose as directed by your health care provider. Remember that any improvement in your diabetes control will make a big difference preventing the development and progression of complications.

- **Take good care of yourself through healthy eating, physical activity, and stress management.**

To find out more about diabetes and ways to reduce your risk of complications, contact your doctor, local Diabetes Centre, pharmacist, or the Canadian Diabetes Association.

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