

Part 2: Prediabetes - Dispelling the myths

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
Thursday, 27 December 2012 09:52

This week's article is part of a multi-part series on prediabetes. In the first article I discussed prediabetes and provided information regarding how it is diagnosed and how you could figure out your risk. This week I will address several misconceptions regarding prediabetes. The final article will provide some more individual and community strategies for addressing this health issue.

Myth 1 - Diabetes runs in my family, I can't do anything about it.

Fact, lifestyle can trump genetics. It works both ways. People who have no significant family history of diabetes can develop diabetes if they follow a plan of eating and inactivity that increases their risk. Similarly, people with a strong family history of diabetes who are committed to remaining active and maintaining a healthy weight, greatly decrease their chances of developing diabetes. Conditions we blame solely on our genes are often related to the fact that we grow up in family systems and cultures that have ways of eating and being that may increase the risk of disease. It is important to know one's family history and take it seriously. However, it is not your destiny. The food that we feed our body is information that helps determine how our genes express themselves. There is much in our genes which we have the power to influence for good or ill. If you have already developed prediabetes (or even diabetes), significant and sustained lifestyle changes may improve your condition. However, the further down the line you get, the more difficult these reversals can become. So when possible, start early and start with prevention. Prevention is especially important for our youth who are facing epidemic levels of overweight, obesity and prediabetes. We have to help them by modeling and developing healthy habits regarding eating and activity.

Myth 2 - It is just prediabetes. Once I am diagnosed with diabetes I will make changes, because that is when the real risks start.

Fact, it is now clear that people who have blood sugars in the prediabetes range already experience an increased risk of many dangerous health conditions such as heart disease and stroke. Some research suggests that Alzheimer's disease may be related (at least in part) to disturbances in the way that the brain uses glucose and that people with diabetes (and prediabetes) are at increased risk for developing Alzheimer's disease. Prediabetes IS a serious condition and can increase your risk for other health problems. Improving your blood sugars can reduce your risk factors for developing these conditions.

Myth 3 - I know I need to lose weight. I will just get the bypass surgery and that will take care of it.

Fact, weight loss surgery is increasingly common and in people who are severely overweight, this may represent an appropriate option to help achieve significant weight loss. Nonetheless, surgery should not be looked at as a miracle cure. Some studies have suggested that this surgery may decrease the chances of developing diabetes or even reverse diabetes in some people. However, a more recent study shows that when people who already have diabetes get bypass surgery, the majority of them will either remain diabetic or (if their diabetes resolves after surgery) be re-diagnosed with diabetes within five years of surgery.

Gastric bypass (and other types of weight loss) surgeries are still relatively recent interventions and we are only beginning to appreciate some the long term health problems from changing the body this way. As this surgery becomes more popular, I am also increasingly concerned that

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our health system is often willing to pay for an expensive and potentially risky surgery but there are very limited resources and support available for people to receive intensive lifestyle and nutritional support that might prevent the need for surgery. It is also important to realize that even in folks who go on to have surgery, they will have to make significant changes to the types and amounts of foods that they eat for their surgery to be successful. So, no matter how you look at it, finding ways to maintain healthy lifestyle patterns regarding eating and activity are essential for your good health.

Myth 4 - I know I need to eat better, but it costs too much.

Fact, we can pay for our health now or pay for illness later. Changing the way that we eat can be a big undertaking. It is not something one can do all at once or that one can do in isolation. To create an environment where all people have access to healthy affordable foods takes individual and community-wide efforts. But, here are a few ways to get started:

1. There are many healthful and affordable additions to one's diet that do not cost a lot of money: add as many vegetables as you can to your diet. Frozen are often more affordable than fresh especially in the winter. Try to avoid canned vegetables as they provide less overall nutrition and are often high in salt.
2. Plan ahead. Plan your meals (at least dinner) for the week and shop to have items on hand that you need to prepare your meals. Any meal you cook at home, is going to generally be more healthful than a meal eaten on the go at a fast-food restaurant. Consider preparing meals ahead or in a crock pot to save time.
3. It is not all about the meat. There is mounting evidence that eating a diet that has too much meat (especially red and processed meats) can be detrimental to our health. There are many other excellent non-meat sources of protein. Consider incorporating more of these into main meals. For instance, consider beans and eggs. When you use meat, a little can go a long way and tough cuts (which are often more affordable) can be made deliciously tender when added to soups or stews.
4. One person cannot do it alone. For all the efforts that we make as individuals to support our health, we can multiply the power of these efforts with community action. Find creative ways to support healthy food cultures in our community: create a supper club where friends bring and share healthy foods and recipes, have a neighborhood soup potluck, create a committee at your church that works on community food issues, make requests of the stores where you shop to carry specific items. Finally, make sure that your elected officials know the value that you place on having access to healthy food in our community and vote for people that share this interest.

I hope these suggestions have been helpful. I would love to hear from you. What are your thoughts about how we can reverse the epidemic of prediabetes in our community?

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you! To respond to this article, request topics for future articles and for additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.co

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