

Diabetes increases with lifestyle change

by Dr. Cynthia Schraer
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Diabetes is a health problem in which there is too much sugar in the blood.

The reason this creates health problems is that the high sugar level causes damage to many systems in the body and can result in foot amputations, kidney failure, heart attack, stroke and blindness.

Sugar in the blood is a type called "glucose," which is necessary as a fuel for body tissues, especially the brain. Since glucose is so important, the body can manufacture it from foods we eat, even if the food contains no sugar.

As times and lifestyles change, diabetes, once rare among Alaska Natives and American Indians, has become a growing problem. "Type II Diabetes" is the most common and tends to run in families — but certain lifestyle factors are also important.

Things that increase the risk of Type II Diabetes are lack of exercise, too much high calorie food and becoming overweight.

In Alaska, we are seeing an increase in the complications related to diabetes — eye problems, kidney failure, heart attacks, stroke and amputations.

It appears that we have an unusual opportunity here, however. Since we can see what a problem diabetes has become for many traditional people, we have advance warning about what may happen. And we know that certain factors in traditional lifestyles seem to be protective.

While most people realize that times have changed and a complete return to the old ways is not realistic, choices can be made in modern life that will help prevent diabetes and lead to better health in other ways, too.

Getting more exercise is very im-

portant. Walking about 20 or 30 minutes three days out of the week helps a lot. Other options are swimming, playing in gym, aerobics, jogging, skiing and others. Chopping wood and hauling water on foot also provide a lot of exercise.

Good nutrition, also important, includes choosing healthy foods such as fish and other Native foods — and avoiding empty calories food such as non-diet pop, candy and chips.

Even with healthy foods, people who eat too much over a long period can become overweight, and this is one of the most important causes of Type II Diabetes. Healthy lifestyle choices including good nutrition and lots of physical activity will improve

the health of nearly everyone, but are especially important for those with a family history of diabetes.

We believe that Type II Diabetes is preventable because all the evidence indicates that not too long ago, Native lifestyles did a pretty good job at this!

Our challenge now is to find ways to live in modern times but still get enough exercise, get good nutrition and avoid getting overweight. This is not an easy task in today's world, but the health of ourselves, our children and those who come after them is worth it.

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It appears that traditional Native lifestyles which involved lots of physical work and good nutrition tended to protect people from diabetes.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, some health surveys indicated that very few Native people had diabetes. However, in the 1980s, health care providers observed that more and more cases seemed to be occurring.

In order to find out how serious this problem was and to make sure all people with diabetes were receiving care, the Diabetes Program at the Alaska Area Native Health Service was started.

The rates of diabetes were determined for 1985, and it was found that 610 Native people had diabetes, for a prevalence rate of 15.7 per 1,000 (age adjusted to the U.S. population). The rate for Eskimos was 8.8 per 1,000; for Indians, 22 per 1,000; and for Aleuts, 27.2 per 1,000.

Annette Island had the highest rate at 31.1 per 1,000, and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta the lowest at 5.8 per 1,000.

Over the next two years, the number of Alaska Natives with diabetes increased to 708 or a rate of 17.4 per 1,000 — 11 percent. The Y-K Delta region had the greatest increase, from 5.8 to 8.9 per 1,000 — a 53 percent increase. We are still working on the 1988-89 data.

This increase in diabetes rates with lifestyle changes has been found around the world. Native people in Canada, the Lower 48 states, Australia and the South Pacific especially have experienced rapid increases in diabetes and its complications as changes from traditional to more modern lifestyles have occurred.

These people also have suffered the long-term complications of diabetes in increasing numbers, to the point where it is very difficult to provide optimum health care for them.