

LIVING WELL

Diabetes increases Risk for Cardiovascular Disease

Diabetes is a significant risk factor for heart disease. In fact, according to Dr. Anna Baer of Cardiovascular Associates of Charlottesville, it doubles the risk of heart disease in men and triples the risk for women. Since, as the CDC reports, heart disease is the leading cause of death for people of most racial and ethnic groups in the United States, it is especially important for people living with diabetes to be aware of this risk.

Why is Diabetes a Risk Factor for Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)?

Although diabetes is treatable, even when glucose levels are under control it greatly increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

"In general, diabetes causes more endothelial dysfunction and more plaque burden, which leads to more extensive heart and coronary disease," noted Dr. Baer. "This leads people with diabetes to have more heart attacks and more symptoms of a silent heart attack, or silent ischemia."

Additionally, people with diabetes often have other conditions that contribute to the risk for developing CVD. These conditions include:

- High blood pressure

(hypertension), which has been associated with insulin resistance and, in combination with diabetes, doubles the risk for CVD.

- Abnormal cholesterol levels and high triglycerides, which often occurs in patients with early coronary heart disease and is characteristic of a lipid disorder associated with insulin resistance.

- Obesity, a major risk factor for CVD that has been strongly associated with insulin resistance.

According to Dr. Baer and other experts, people with diabetes are also more likely to be diagnosed with heart failure. Heart failure is a serious condition, in which your heart can't pump blood well. This failure can lead to swelling in the legs and fluid building up in the lungs, making it hard to breathe.

What is a Silent Heart Attack?

"A silent heart attack is a heart attack that occurs without symptoms," said Dr. Baer. "It is discovered later, usually during a routine physician visit or checkup, during which we find evidence after the fact that they've had a heart attack."

Due to this lack of recognizable symptoms, patients may attribute

seemingly minor signs like fatigue or mild chest discomfort to illnesses like the flu or indigestion. However, despite the lack of symptoms, silent heart attacks can still have some serious consequences, as they leave behind scar tissue, a weakened heart muscle, and an increased risk for a subsequent heart attack.

"At this time, we don't know exactly why diabetics have more episodes of silent ischemia," noted Dr. Baer. "We do know that diabetes affects our nerves, too, so that may be why people with diabetes don't experience the same warning symptoms."

How Can a Person with Diabetes Reduce their Risk of CVD?

The risk of cardiovascular disease is significant for people with diabetes, but it can be reduced through changes in lifestyle and physician intervention.

People can improve their overall cardiovascular health through:

- Physical activity (directed by your physician if you are new to exercise)
- Stop smoking, or don't start
- Follow a healthy diet
- Aim for a healthy weight
- Manage stress

"If you have diabetes, it is extremely important to see a physician regularly," said Dr. Baer. "Your doctor can help you aggressively manage your other risk factors as well, such as abnormal cholesterol and blood pressure issues. In addition, it's critical to keep your sugars controlled, and a physician can help you with that as well."

Your doctor may also prescribe medicines that can help you keep your blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol close to your target levels.

Finally, reach out to a diabetes educator who can provide you with guidance for managing diabetes and avoiding further health complications. If you do not work with an educator already, ask your physician for a referral.

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If you have questions about managing your diabetes and reducing your risk of heart disease, contact your primary care provider. If you do not have a provider, you can request a referral at 1-800-SENTARA, or visit Sentara.com.