



PATIENT POWER

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Managing diabetes depends largely on the individual.

Diabetes is a major health concern for the United States, affecting more than 30 million Americans. It is particularly prevalent among veterans. The good news, however, is that there are many ways to manage and halt the progression of diabetes, and they all center on the patient.

“Diabetes requires a team effort,” says Adam Mayerson, an endocrinologist in Connecticut. “It doesn’t matter how many medications are prescribed or how much fancy technology is offered; if patients do not commit to their treatment plan, we cannot achieve optimal health.”

Patients are encouraged to take the lead by monitoring their blood-sugar levels, taking their medications as prescribed and making healthy lifestyle choices.

People with diabetes can’t feel when their blood sugar (glucose) is high. In addition, people’s bodies work differently, so testing blood sugar is the only way to know for certain if levels are healthy from day to day. For some people, a high-tech option like continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) is the best choice. For others, a simple glucometer and testing strips are all that is needed.

Regardless of the tools used, patients must commit to tracking blood-sugar changes so they understand how their bodies are working. For example, if blood sugar rises to over 180 mg/dL after eating a meal, that’s a sign that the portion size or carbohydrate content may need to be reduced, or that more medication may be required. Individuals should keep track of readings through a glucometer in a planner or on a smartphone so they can discuss them with their health-care team.

Medication may be necessary to lower glucose levels consistently. In these cases, it is crucial that patients take medication exactly as prescribed.

A 2018 study of veterans found that patients with diabetes who did not take medications consistently were 14 percent more likely to have a heart attack and 22 percent more likely to have a stroke. For the greatest success, in addition to following a blood-sugar testing schedule, individuals with diabetes should have a medication schedule. Reminders can be set via an alarm clock, app, smartphone alert or written daily checklist. Pill organizers can also help people with diabetes stick to their prescribed plan.

Consistency is the key to managing diabetes. This is especially true for lifestyle choices like eating regular meals every four to six hours, exercising daily, avoiding smoking and managing stress. Make changes slowly, and focus on small goals to avoid getting overwhelmed.

When it comes to eating, there is no one “diabetes diet.” It is helpful to work with a registered dietitian nutritionist who can recommend a personalized nutrition plan. In general, it is best to limit or avoid sugary foods and drinks like cookies, cake, candy, soda and juice, which can cause blood sugar to rise quickly or spike. High-fiber, high-protein foods will help keep glucose levels steady. Unprocessed foods like vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, low-fat dairy products and whole fruits are great choices.

Exercise is an especially potent tool in managing diabetes. It effectively lowers blood sugar levels while assisting weight management and decreasing stress. All forms of movement work, including walking, biking, swimming or a fitness class.

Americans with diabetes have more resources than ever available to them, putting the power in their hands.

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