

The facts about Diabetes

Diabetes is a chronic disease where the body cannot produce enough insulin or cannot use the insulin produced (insulin resistance). This doesn't not happen overnight but is caused by exposure to high glucose levels in the blood over a period of time.

When blood glucose levels rise after eating high sugar foods the body releases insulin which enables the cells it use the glucose for energy. Insulin also tells our body to store fat, causing the glucose to be changed into triglycerides (fat) and stored. Continued exposure of insulin to the cells causes them to become resistant to this insulin, and therefore higher levels of insulin are required for the glucose to be used. (insulin resistance). Initially it was thought that all carbohydrates would cause the high insulin release and therefore be responsible for type 2 diabetes, but this has been shown to not to the case, and that it is in fact the amount of refined sugar that is eaten. High levels of insulin lead to weight gain and ultimately obesity.

Insulin causes insulin resistance, so the more the body cells are exposed to insulin, the more resistant they become, which means more insulin is required to enable the glucose to be driven into the cell to be used, therefore creating very vicious cycle of rising insulin levels, therefore rising fat storage and rising weight. This helps to explain why people who have been obese for longer periods of time find it harder to lose weight than those who are more recently obese. This has a huge impact on the childhood obesity we are now seeing more of, it will be harder for these children to lose weight as adults.

Diabetes is reversible, it can be changed by diet, exercise and weight loss. Getting up and moving for 5 minutes every 30 mins had a profound effect on glucose metabolism. Losing 6-7% body weight can lead to 58% reduction in the risk of developing type 2 diabetes over 3-5 years. There is clear evidence of sugar sweetened beverages increases the risk of developing diabetes in a dose dependent manner. Substitution of 1 serving per day of water / tea for soft drink reduces the incidence of type 2 diabetes by 14-25%

Treating diabetes with insulin drugs will not get to the root of the problem which is diet and lifestyle. Treating the high blood sugars in diabetes with insulin is just treating the symptom of diabetes, not the actual problem. The problem is insulin resistance which is actually being made worse by the additional insulin being given to the patient. It is similar to just treating a high fever with Panadol and not actually looking for the cause of the fever, the fever is a symptom, not the cause.

The epidemic of type 2 DM is only recent, from the 1990s onwards meaning that environment, diet and lifestyle changes are causing the diabetes. This also means it is changeable and reversible. We can reverse the diabetes, it won't be an easy road, but people can get better. They need to follow a diet with zero sugar, low carbohydrate intake, high protein and good fat intake, exercise every day for at least 30 minutes and stop smoking. Patients need to take charge of this as it is not acceptable with any part of medicine that people should have to live with curable disease and get sicker from the curable disease, leading to dialysis, blindness, amputation, liver failure and premature death.

In New Zealand

- General obesity accounts for 80-85% of the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.
- Total deaths from diabetes projected to rise by more than 50% in the next 10 years.
- It is estimated that 1 in 2 adults with diabetes are undiagnosed which is concerning as they are more at risk of developing complications. Nearly 40 kiwis a day were diagnosed with diabetes in 2014, more than 10,000 people. 12% of total health expenditure in NZ is on diabetes.
- Diabetes is more common in Maori and Pacific Islanders, They're 3 times as likely to get it than other New Zealanders

If you have diabetes it is worth having this discussion with your doctor and seeking nutritional advice for trying to take control of your diabetes through diet and lifestyle, rather than relying on medication.