



Health & Safety Alert #16-08-02

Diabetes - Risk & Complications

Diabetes Mellitus is the full name for the disease most commonly called “Diabetes.” In this condition a person cannot produce enough or effectively use insulin to control their blood sugar (glucose) level. The earlier that Diabetes is found and treated, the fewer the complications will be. As the incidence of Diabetes in the United States is increasing rapidly, everyone should be aware of this potentially fatal disease.

Risk factors include: family history; inactive lifestyle; and obesity. A fasting blood glucose above 125 on more than one occasion can indicate a person has Diabetes. The American Diabetes Association recommends that all adults have a fasting blood glucose test by age 45 and if normal, retest at least every three years. If any of the above risk factors are present, testing should begin earlier and be done more often. Elevated blood sugar can develop so slowly that many persons are unaware of the symptoms.

Symptoms of Diabetes can include:

- Hunger.
- Extreme thirst.
- Frequent urination.
- Unexplained weight loss.
- Fatigue.
- Blurry vision.
- Frequent infections.

Complications of high glucose levels occur in all body systems and, when left uncontrolled, will lead to death.

- Diabetes kills more than 193,000 Americans each year.
- Two out of three people with Diabetes die from heart attacks, strokes or peripheral vascular disease.
- Diabetes causes nerve damage that makes painless heart attacks more likely and harder to diagnosis.
- Heart attacks are more likely to be fatal in persons who have Diabetes than in those who don't.
- Uncontrolled Diabetes can also lead to blindness, kidney disease and amputations.

Prevention of diabetic complications depends upon the close control of blood glucose levels through diet, exercise, monitoring and medications. Excess weight strains the heart, raises blood pressure, and is usually associated with elevated cholesterol and triglyceride levels. The right balance of foods will help insulin and/or Diabetes medications keep glucose levels lower. Physical activity helps control weight and build muscle mass, which makes insulin and Diabetes medications work more effectively. Glucose levels need to be monitored frequently, sometimes multiple times daily. If insulin injections and/or medications are needed, they must be taken with regularly scheduled meals and snacks.

Screening exams and physician ordered laboratory tests can detect early complications:

- Eye disease (diabetic retinopathy); annual screening should be done by medical provider.
- Foot lesions and nerve problems (peripheral neuropathy); annual exam and daily self-exams are essential.
- Heart disease: will affect nearly every person with Diabetes; all diabetics should be examined regularly for signs such as high blood pressure, lipid levels, EKG changes, impaired circulation, shortness of breath or chest pain.
- Laboratory screening tests include the **Glycated hemoglobin test (A1C)**, which shows average blood glucose and should be done twice a year; **cholesterol and lipids** (control of these reduces heart disease risk) should be done annually; and **urine protein** (sign of kidney disease or nephropathy), check annually.

Information for those with Diabetes can be obtained from:

- American Diabetes Association (ADA) 1-800-DIABETES. www.Diabetes.org
- American Heart Association 1-800-242-8721. www.americanheart.org/Diabetes
- National Diabetes Education Program. <http://ndep.nih.gov>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. www.cdc.gov/Diabetes
- Local county or city health department.
- Ohio Department of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities “Every Healthy Person” document, under Diabetes care guidelines for individuals. <http://www.odmrdd.state.oh.us>

For questions or comments regarding the above Alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810.

January 2004