

Washington Hospital Seminar to Focus on Reducing Your Risk

While surveys show most people with diabetes are concerned about blindness or losing a limb, the biggest threat by far is cardiovascular disease. About 65 percent of diabetics die from heart disease or stroke, according to the National Institutes of Health.

"Diabetes can damage the inner lining of your blood vessels from head to toe," said Dr. Ash Jain, a cardiologist at Washington Hospital. "This damage makes it easier for plaque to build up in the arteries, clogging them."

Jain will discuss the link between diabetes and cardiovascular disease at a seminar on Thursday, April 5, from 7 to 9 p.m. Part of a monthly educational program called Diabetes Matters, "Diabetes and its Effect on Cardiovascular Disease" will be held at the Conrad E. Anderson, M.D. Auditorium at Washington West, 2500 Mowry Avenue, in Fremont.

Cardiovascular disease refers to diseases of the heart and blood vessels. Arteries are a type of blood vessel that carries blood away from the heart to the rest of the body, transporting oxygen and nutrients. When arteries are clogged, blood flow is restricted.

With diabetes, the body does not produce or properly use insulin, a hormone that helps convert sugar, starches and other foods into energy needed for daily life. While the cause is not known, both genetics and environmental factors such as obesity and lack of exercise seem to be involved.

Type 1 diabetes results from the body's failure to produce insulin and accounts for 5 to 10 percent of all diagnosed cases of the disease. People with type 1 diabetes must inject insulin into their bodies to survive.

The more common form is type 2 diabetes, accounting for 90 to 95 percent of all diagnosed cases. It usually begins as insulin resistance, which occurs when the cells do not use insulin properly. As the need for insulin rises, the pancreas often loses its ability to produce it.

Unfortunately, most people with diabetes don't understand the risks of cardiovascular disease and are more concerned about undergoing a foot or leg amputation, according to the American Diabetes Society. In fact, amputation, heart attack and stroke all stem from the same artery-damaging process. When plaque buildup occurs in the arteries that supply blood to the legs and feet, those body parts suffer. When the damage affects the major arteries, the result can be a heart attack or stroke.

Reducing Your Risk

To avoid life-threatening complications, people with diabetes need to keep their disease under control and take proactive steps to reduce the risks.

Manage blood sugar levels. Keeping blood sugar levels within optimal ranges can prevent or delay blood vessel damage. The best way to assess your blood sugar level is the hemoglobin A1C test, a measure of average blood glucose. You should keep your A1C level under seven.

Keep your blood pressure in check. Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of the arteries. High blood pressure can lead to a variety of cardiovascular problems for everyone, not just people with diabetes. But for those with the disease, it can increase the severity of complications and speed up their development. Measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg), blood pressure should be no higher than 130/80 mmHg.

Control your blood cholesterol. The body actually needs cholesterol for a number of important functions, but too much can lead to cardiovascular disease. While a problem for everyone, it is even more dangerous for people with diabetes. The bloodstream carries cholesterol in particles called lipoproteins. People with diabetes often have lower levels of high-density lipoproteins (HDL), often called "good cholesterol." In addition, the particles of low-density lipoproteins (LDL), often called "bad cholesterol," are usually smaller and denser in people with diabetes, making them more likely to block blood vessels. People with diabetes should keep their LDL below 100.

Make healthy choices. Part of managing your diabetes and lowering your risk for cardiovascular disease is making choices that promote good health. Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, selecting foods low in fat and salt, maintaining a healthy weight, staying physically active, drinking alcohol only in moderation, and never using tobacco all help improve your chances of avoiding cardiovascular disease.

"It's critical for people with diabetes to keep the disease under control and avoid the complications associated with it," Jain said.

Washington Hospital offers Diabetes Matters education classes every month. The free classes feature expert speakers followed by group discussions. For more information, call (510) 608-1327 or visit www.whhs.com.