

# There is *no* missing link between Diabetes and Heart Disease.

By: Dr. Tanveer A. Qureshi, M.D.

**T**here is an undeniable link between diabetes and coronary artery or heart disease. Most diabetics have other health problems -or risk factors- such as high blood pressure, obesity, cholesterol disorders, and insulin resistance that increase one's risk for heart disease and stroke. When combined with diabetes, these risk factors add up to big trouble. Unfortunately, diabetes is associated with serious complications and death. People with diabetes are much more likely to get heart disease, have a heart attack and/or stroke. With diabetes, heart attacks occur earlier in life and often result in death. In fact, data from the American Heart Association estimates that more than 65% of people with diabetes die from heart disease or stroke. The death rate due to cardiovascular reasons is two to four times higher than those adults without diabetes. As you can see, these are very significant statistics. By managing diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and cholesterol, to name a few, people with diabetes can reduce their risk.

Diabetes is a common condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high because the body is unable to use it properly. There is a variety of causes for this, such as the body not producing insulin or enough insulin, or simply ignoring the insulin it does produce. Glucose is a sugar the body produces primarily from carbohydrates in your food. The glucose is used by the cells of the body to produce energy. But the cells cannot just take the

glucose out of the blood themselves. To get the glucose out of the blood, the body needs insulin. Insulin is a hormone the body needs to convert glucose, or sugar, into energy the body needs to function. Insulin is instrumental in transporting sugar from the blood into our cells, where it gets used by our cells as fuel. Sugar is essentially the gas our engines, or bodies, need to function.

Heart disease is an umbrella term for a number of conditions affecting the heart and blood vessels around the heart. Coronary artery disease is the most common form of heart disease and is characterized by a narrowing or blocking of the arteries (by fatty deposits) supplying blood, oxygen and nutrients to your heart. It can be associated with a hardening of these same arteries.

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People with diabetes are more likely to get heart disease. Chronic high blood sugar levels have been associated with a narrowing of the arteries around the heart, high blood pressure, and increased cholesterol levels.

Because people with diabetes face an increased risk for heart disease and death, individuals who have diabetes that goes undetected and therefore untreated face an even worse scenario. People with diabetes suffer from neuropathy, or nerve damage, as a result of uncontrolled diabetes. This nerve

damage can cause diabetics to suffer from what some call “silent ischemia” or painless heart attack. People with nerve damage are less sensitive to the sensations of touch, heat, pain etc. This may also include the anticipated pain from a heart attack. These rather vague sensations can often be attributed to other potential problems, which make it difficult to assess patients with diabetes for heart disease.

The most important thing for patients and their families to remember is not to panic or lose hope. People with diabetes can lead long and happy lives. However, this can usually only be obtained with significant lifestyle and diet modifications, and may require the use of medication. Diabetes management requires more than blood glucose control. There are a number of steps individuals with diabetes can take to prevent heart disease or reduce the likelihood of having another heart attack or stroke.

Some of the things you can do to lower your risk:

1. Keep your blood glucose (sugar) level under control. Get tested for diabetes.
2. Weight loss.
3. Lower your cholesterol.
4. Becoming more physically active. The key is to make it part of your daily routine.
5. Control and reduce your blood pressure, if necessary.
6. Quit smoking if you do so.

Early diagnosis and treatment is the key. Educate yourself about diabetes. Establish a support network. Talk to your primary care physician and get screened for diabetes and heart disease, if you have not already done so. If you would like, you may also call us directly at The Heart Center of North Texas. ■