

Women and Diabetes

Being a woman who has diabetes can pose a challenge. But, with a little help you can meet the challenge.

Lois Jovanovic is a doctor who treats lots of people who have diabetes. And, she has had diabetes herself for many years. She tells her patients that the disease chooses the stunning, smart women. Lois is certainly such a person. Many others with diabetes are too.

But, the disease “chooses” women for other things too. It can bring special burdens for women. These may be troubles with their bodies or with their emotions. All their lives, women with the disease face more such challenges than men do.

Eating and weight

Here is an example. For teens with diabetes, more girls than boys are overweight. There is greater pressure on women to be thin. So, it’s no surprise that more girls than boys try to lose weight in ways that harm blood sugar. One of the scariest ways is to cut way back on insulin doses. This has a name; it is called “insulin purging.” Many of the calories you eat will get urinated away; that is why we call it purging. Women are about ten times more likely than men to do this. Insulin purging does have an effect on your weight. But, it also makes blood sugars stay high. One of my patients called it “a very controlled high.” Here’s why. As high as her blood sugars were, she was the one controlling things to keep them there. But, controlled or not, it causes a problem for women who do this. They are more at risk for getting long term problems from diabetes.

What helps? It's really tough to accept this fact; efforts to keep blood sugar close to normal often lead to problems with weight control. Each woman has to decide how she will balance these. It can help to be realistic about how you want your body to look. Few people over the age of 14 look like models.

And, what about the aging movie stars we see? They look fit and glamorous. They spend a lot of time and money to look that way. Looking and feeling good can be a reality for all of us. The key is a healthy, balanced way of life. This includes:

- Good eating
- Regular exercise
- Doing things that bring pleasure to your emotions and spirit.

If you do these, you may not look like a movie star. But, you will feel like a million.

Pregnancy

Women, but not men, go through pregnancy and child birth. And, these are a challenge if you have diabetes. Children are so precious. It's not a surprise that most women work extra hard during this time. They must keep blood sugar close to normal when they are pregnant. These efforts go a long way; they cut back on the risk of problems with the pregnancy due to diabetes. I have seen huge drops in HbA1c in women preparing to get pregnant. One woman went from 10 percent to under 6 in just 6 months. Then she started trying to get pregnant. Most of the problems from diabetes come on rather soon. They happen prior to the 7th week after you have conceived. So, you must take action before you get pregnant. To protect you and your baby, get blood sugars near normal; they should be controlled before you try to get pregnant. Young women are more likely to get pregnant before they have planned it. They may not be able to lower their blood sugars in time to help as much.

What helps? If you are childbearing age, take care not to get pregnant if you did not plan it. This is especially true if you are a young woman. You can have a high chance of a smooth pregnancy and a healthy baby. But, you improve your chances only if your blood sugar is close to normal. And, you must keep it close to normal all during your pregnancy. The woman I just mentioned had her baby 6 weeks ago. I saw her holding the baby after she came home from the birth. The look on her face made it clear that all the effort was worth it.

Heart disease

We often think of heart disease as less common in women than men. This is true for people who do not have diabetes. But, for people with diabetes this is not so. Here, women and men get heart disease at similar rates. There are many reasons; with diabetes, women seem to lose some of what protects them from heart disease.

What helps? Women who have diabetes can cut their risk of heart disease. Here are some ways:

- Keep blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol near normal
- Eat healthy and exercise to control blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol
- Do not smoke, since it increases risk for heart disease.

Emotional issues

Last, but not least, there are key emotional issues. I've done some research on this with Dr. Mark Peyrot. It shows that women who have diabetes may have a harder time than men. Specifically, we found that:

- Women felt less confident; they were less sure about being able to care for their diabetes.
- Women felt less supported by their spouses when it came to their care. And, women felt more hassled by spouses.
- Women had more lapses in self-care. They lapsed in self-care related to diet above all.
- Women had lower quality of life; this was low for eating most of all. They were less pleased overall with their diabetes care.
- Women were more apt to say they had sadness or anxiety.

These were areas where men and women were different. But, we found that men and women were alike on many issues; this includes most areas of self-care. Still, there was not one issue where women had an advantage.

Some of the differences are common ones; we see them with men and women in general. Here is an example. In those who do not have diabetes, women are more prone to be depressed. They feel less supported by their spouses, too. Still others may reflect the way gender and diabetes interact;

this makes things more complex. This is the case with eating issues. These tend to affect women more than men. And, they interact with the demands of self care for the disease. Some differences could be due to another fact; women are more likely to express their thoughts and feelings. For instance, women may be more apt to say they don't feel confident.

Women in our study also had higher HbA1c's than the men did.

What helps? All this points to many things that may help women with diabetes. Have your family be a part of your diabetes care. This can make a big difference. Their help can be practical (such as cooking a healthy meal). Or, it can be emotional (like praising your hard work at self care). Next, coping well with food and body image is crucial. This is a really tough one. But, some of the suggestions I've made in this and earlier columns may help. And, get help for emotional distress; this can be vital.

Life with diabetes can be really hard. This may be even more so for women. If you get down and stay that way for a while, get help. You may need just a few sessions with a counselor. (Try to find one who knows about diabetes.) But you may need longer care. This may be the case if you are depressed or have other serious problems.

If you feel distress, you should get care as soon as possible. Here is why getting good care is important.

1. It feels good to feel less hassled and overwhelmed.
2. When you ease your distress, you can feel set to take the best care of your diabetes. That will help you feel better today and in the years to come.

Being a woman who has diabetes can pose a challenge. But, with a little help you can meet the challenge.

*****Authored by Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins Health System*****