

African American Women at Risk

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For many African Americans, traditional soul food high in fat and cholesterol, like barbecue ribs or fried chicken, are diet mainstays. But too much fatty food, particularly when com-bined with a lack of exercise, can also be dangerous, especially for people like Gail Saxton.

“I would eat anything and I didn’t like to exercise,” said Saxton, a 47-year old postal employee in Washington, D.C. Saxton was no stranger to diabetes. Both of her parents, a sister, and a brother lived with the disease.

Because of her family’s medical history, excess weight and poor diet, Saxton was at a high risk for diabetes, and her recent blood sugar tests were high.

Obesity and lack of physical activity are contributing factors that can lead to diabetes in African Americans. These unhealthy lifestyles may also put a person at high risk for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which like diabetes, can set the stage for heart disease and stroke.

The latest statistics show that African American women are at a higher risk for diabetes than White women. Among African Americans 20 and older, about 12 percent of women and 8.5 percent of men have diabetes. For those 50 and older, the numbers climb to 28 percent of women and 19 percent of men. The numbers continue to increase with age at alarming levels, with nearly one in three African American women ages 65 to 74 years having diabetes.

What’s worse is that many African Americans may have diabetes and not know. Studies show diabetes can be present for nine to twelve years before it is diagnosed. Untreated diabetes can lead to blindness, amputations, kidney disease, and premature death from heart disease and stroke, according to the NDEP.

Saxton had watched her family members with diabetes go in and out of the hospital and had seen enough.

“I decided to change and I’ve never looked back,” she said. She has cut out most high fat products, red meat and pork from her diet and drinks lots of water in place of her usual sodas. Saxton also tries to encourage her family to do the same but says she finds that some of them do not take diabetes seriously. “They continue to eat the wrong things and won’t exercise,” Saxton said. “I wish I had thought about [my diet] earlier in life, before I got diabetes.”

The good news is that managing and preventing diabetes is possible. Women with diabetes who maintain lower blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol levels can lower their risk of cardiovascular disease.

To be proactive with your diabetes, work with your health care provider and start taking steps today to lower your risk for heart disease and stroke.

For more information, go to <http://ndep.nih.gov> or <http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes> or call the National Diabetes Education Program at 1-800-438-5383. ❖

