

Getting to the Heart of Diabetes

By Roger Campbell, Senior Editor/Writer, American Heart Association
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It's no health secret: minorities in America are more likely to develop—and die from—cardiovascular disease. Diabetes is a major reason why. In fact, according to the National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases, in 2000, among various racial and ethnic groups in the United States, American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest occurrence of diabetes—15.1 percent. Blacks and Latino Americans are right behind them at 13 percent and 10.2 percent respectively. These numbers are much higher compared to those of Whites—7.8 percent.

Furthermore, about 80 percent of all people newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes are overweight. And as most healthcare professionals know, obesity and physical inactivity—risk factors for heart disease—are more prevalent among Blacks and Hispanics. And when a person has diabetes and high blood pressure (also more prevalent and severe in Blacks and Hispanics), his or her risk for cardiovascular disease doubles.

If that's not enough, there's a great disconnect between patient perception and reality of diabetes' relationship to heart disease, according to a survey released by the American Heart Association (AHA) in 2001. Among the disturbing findings, only 33 percent of people with type 2 diabetes considered heart disease to be among the “most serious” diabetes-related complications. Yet 63 percent of diabetes patients in the survey experienced cardiovascular disease.

So it's a case of bad news, more bad news, then good news: 1) Type 2 diabetes is nearing epidemic proportions in America; 2) Most people don't know about diabetes' relationship to heart disease, especially minorities who are disproportionately affected by it; and 3) You can help your patients or those at risk control or prevent diabetes.

“Research from the past few years has helped us to better understand the link between diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and the role insulin resistance plays in both,” says AHA chief science officer, Sidney C. Smith, Jr., MD. “Unfortunately, diabetes patients still tend to treat heart disease as a separate concern.”

Heart-Healthy Dietary Guidelines Updated

The American Heart Association (AHA) has updated its dietary guidelines to make them more helpful to a broader public audience. The new guidelines include advice for people at high risk for heart disease and stroke, as well as for those who already suffer from these conditions. By addressing the special dietary needs of people with or at risk for hyperlipidemia, hypertension, diabetes, insulin resistance, renal failure, heart failure, and other conditions, these guidelines are unique in the nutrition arena.

For more information and the consumer booklet *An Eating Plan for Healthy Americans: The New 2000 Food Guidelines*, go to <http://www.americanheart.org> ❖



For these reasons, the AHA has enlisted in the battle against diabetes, one of the major risk factors for heart disease and stroke—America's No. 1 and No. 3 killers. A key weapon in its fight is *The Heart of Diabetes: Understanding Insulin Resistance*.

AHA launched the free program in July 2001, setting a goal to enroll 10,000 people by the end of 2002. *The Heart of Diabetes* program provides type 2 diabetes patients with knowledge and tools to reduce their risk for heart disease and stroke. A program guide then takes them through steps to apply what they've learned. After completing a health risk assessment to gauge their condition, participants are enrolled as *Heart of Diabetes Thrivers* and receive:

- ♦ A journal that includes tips to help manage their diabetes and reduce their risk, and a ledger to track their A1c, cholesterol, blood pressure and glucose levels and exercise activities. This will encourage more communication between patients and their healthcare providers;
- ♦ A free 12-month subscription to *Diabetes Positive* magazine;
- ♦ Incentives throughout the year to help them stay motivated; and
- ♦ Ongoing tips and facts on physical activity, nutrition, emerging trends, new research and profiles of Thrivers' successes.

At the end of their first year, *Thrivers* complete a survey to measure how much they've learned about heart disease, type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance. They also record their progress made to control and prevent these diseases.

AHA recognizes the need to increase its efforts to “most at risk” minority populations. That's why it's now tailoring *The Heart of Diabetes* to the Black community. AHA plans to secure an African American celebrity spokesperson to help “re-launch” the program for a more comprehensive and sustained communications effort in 2003. To encourage more interest and participation among Hispanics, the association will also translate program materials into Spanish.

AHA also will create a diabetes module for its popular and successful *Search Your Heart*, a faith-based heart health program tailored to African Americans that includes education and activity kits on high blood pressure, stroke, nutrition and physical activity. The association also will develop a Spanish version of *Search Your Heart* that will include a diabetes module.

For more information on *The Heart of Diabetes: Understanding Insulin Resistance*, go to <http://www.americanheart.org/diabetes> Web site or call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721). ❖

