The Connection Between Diabetes and Diarrhea

by ABIGAIL DAVID

Understanding Diabetes and Diarrhea

Unfortunately for someone living with type 1 diabetes, there are many unpleasant, somewhat taboo complications that we may one day have to face. Many people feel shameful or embarrassed when it comes to openly discussing complications (even with their doctors) because of the misplaced guilt associated with them. Yes, we have the power to manage our diabetes so that many big issues later in life can be avoided and not become a part of our reality. That being said, some bodies are much more prone to complications and even if the individual does everything in their power to manage their type 1 diabetes, it is still possible for them to develop.

Complications of Diabetes

Many people assume when it comes to diabetic complications that the main concern is loss of blood circulation to lower limbs resulting in amputation or the damaging of nerves in the eyes leading to blindness. While those are some of the most extreme cases of neuropathy (nerve damage), they are some of the last complications for someone living with type 1 diabetes to develop. In most cases, neuropathy will start to affect parts of the body such as the gastrointestinal system long before ever causing blindness.

Although it sounds pale in comparison to some of the more dramatic complications, having to deal with gastrointestinal issues on a daily basis can seriously take a toll on someone's quality of life. It can inhibit you from partaking in certain daily activities and joys out of fear of not having access to a nearby bathroom.

Gastrointestinal problems can present themselves in a number of ways for someone living with diabetes, including but not limited to gastroesophageal reflux disease, gastroparesis, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, glycogenic hepatopathy and enteropathy (loss of nerve function to the small intestine causing diarrhea).

Diabetes and Diarrhea: What's the Connection?

A minimally discussed subject, the relationship and the impact of diarrhea on people living with type 1 diabetes is a lot bigger than imagined. It is easy to attribute stomach issues to infection or viruses and not ever think about how blood sugar management is affecting the GI tract. This is why most patients who see a doctor for a stomach issue living with type 1 diabetes are often given band-aid solutions for a virus. Sometimes that’s all there is to worry about, but putting too many band-aids on the symptoms will only make the underlying issue worse in the long run. It’s important to take note of how your body is feeling on a daily basis and if stomach issues are repeatedly a problem, it’s a good idea to investigate further on how T1D might be affecting your intestines.

Many people with type 1 diabetes will experience nerve damage at some point in their life. Nerve damage occurs because of long term elevated blood sugar levels. Diarrhea also affects many people living with gastrointestinal enteropathy. The type of diarrhea that someone living with diabetes-induced enteropathy will most likely be a lot more intense and more frequent than getting it every now and then. Because the intestines have been damaged, the frequency of passing stool will be much more irregular and unpredictable. It is common to have diarrhea

multiple times in a day followed by two to three days of constipation. It is important to visit a doctor or specialist if you are experiencing persistent abnormal bowel movements and to advocate for yourself if you truly believe that diabetes is the cause of it. As mentioned above, the prescription for treating diabetic diarrhea is vastly different from a regular virus, so it’s important your doctor knows the true cause.

Prevention

Some ways to prevent diabetic diarrhea are:

1. Maintain in-range blood sugar (this one is the most effective and without this, the other tips won’t be as effective)

2. Stay hydrated - bring a reusable water bottle around with you

3. Avoid artificial sweeteners such as sorbitol, marital and aspartame

4. Making sure you are getting enough fiber in your diet

5. Consistent exercise

6. Taking recommended probiotics and eating fermented foods

Coping with the Emotional Impact

Having to deal with the effects of a gastrointestinal problem from diabetes can feel totally defeating and shameful, but it’s necessary to remember that so many diabetics experience it and you are not alone. Nerve damage affects so many people living with type 1 diabetes and it is nothing to feel shameful or insecure about.

Going to meet-ups or support groups and connecting with other type 1 diabetics is a healthy way to deal with the emotional side of diabetic nerve damage. Having a close friend to talk to, or seeing a therapist is also highly recommended to help process the diagnosis. Seeking proper help and doing the best you can to prevent it from becoming a part of your daily routine is the best thing anyone living with type 1 diabetes can do to live their happiest life.