

Putting lifestyle changes in place crucial to curb diabetes

THE prevalence of diabetes is increasing at an alarming rate in especially low- and middle-income countries. Type 2 diabetes, typically mediated by, among other things, genetics and family history, excess bodyweight and sedentary lifestyles, makes up the great majority of such cases.

There is also a strong link between increased bodyweight and the onset of type 2 diabetes. A recent study even projected that obesity prevalence will continue to rise globally over the next decade. The rise in type 2 diabetes cases requires urgent attention as people with this condition are at greater risk for heart attacks, strokes and blindness.

Although this may seem all doom and gloom, diabetes can be treated. It should be regularly monitored, and can

be managed by various drug regimens prescribed by physicians. Significant lifestyle changes, as well as a balanced diet, can also help in this regard. It is also important to reduce the daily calorie intake by roughly eating 20 percent less per meal.

Alternatively, regular fasting – one or two days per week – may also be an option, although this may be much harder to consistently maintain over a prolonged period. Individuals with diabetes should consult with their physicians before adopting such initiatives.

In the battle against diabetes, there has been an increased focus on the high intake of added sugars in our diets – typically found in processed foods such as sugar-sweetened beverages (soft drinks, fruit juices and energy drinks).

Minister of Finance Pravin Gordhan earlier this year indicated the introduction of a “sugar tax” that will come into effect during 2017.

The details of this tax still remain unclear, but it is likely that South Africa will follow the example of countries such as Mexico that introduced a similar initiative in 2014. This step was taken as around 70 percent of Mexicans are overweight or obese, together with a high prevalence of type 2 diabetes and a relatively high intake of added sugars derived from soft drinks.

Early data shows that one year after the introduction of the “sugar tax” in Mexico, sales of sugary beverages declined by 12 percent, with a concomitant increase in the selling of bottled water. The counter-argument is some-

times made that such a tax represents the behaviour of a nanny state, and that one cannot lay the blame for increased obesity prevalence at the doorstep of a single nutrient such as higher sugar intake. The issue is indeed more complex and excess, overall caloric intake is a vital component of the problem.

However, mounting research findings demonstrate that the consumption of relatively high amounts of added sugar can damage the body.

In Britain, a different approach is followed and the tax is instead levied on the manufacturer – thus not directly raising the costs of sugary drinks. In addition, such a tax is related to the degree of sugar content found within sugary drinks, and the onus shifts to the manufacturer to lower sugar content in

order to pay fewer taxes.

The key to healthy living is, therefore, one of moderation and, as discussed, a good start would be to eat a little less (try to establish this as a new habit), adopt a balanced eating plan such as the well-proven Mediterranean diet, lower added sugar intake (especially sugary drinks), and aim to do around 30 minutes of aerobic exercise per day for most of the week.

This mantra should also be rolled out to persons without diabetes (young and old) as the early adoption of suitable lifestyle choices in terms of diet and activity levels is likely to pay “health dividends” later on in life.

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