Step by Step, You Can Keep Diabetes Out of Your Life

As the Lewis and Clark County health officer, I’m well aware of the terrible impacts of diabetes. It’s been a giant blip on public health’s radar for decades now.

But I have a personal interest, too. Several years ago, I learned through routine medical tests that my blood sugar level was too high. My doctor diagnosed me as “pre-diabetic,” which means I’m teetering on the edge of having the full-blown disease.

Unfortunately, I have plenty of company. In fact, we’re in the midst of a worldwide “diabetes tsunami,” as some have called it. The International Diabetes Federation reports that about 415 million people suffer from this incurable yet preventable disease. It kills someone every six seconds.

According to a study released last month by the University of Pennsylvania, diabetes is now the third-leading cause of death in the United States after heart disease and cancer. It accounts for 12 percent of deaths nationwide—a much higher percentage than previously thought.

That’s staggering. Even worse is the fact that the prevalence of diabetes is still growing. It’s more than three times what it was three decades ago. Although the incidence rate in Montana is less than that of the nation as a whole, it has jumped from 3 percent in 1990 to 8 percent in 2015. That’s a dangerous, sobering, and costly trend.

Path to Prevention

Health officials attribute the diabetes epidemic primarily to two factors: the aging of the population and the alarming rise in obesity. None of us can do anything about the first, but we can all do something about the latter.

According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA), this country spent $322 billion on medical care associated with diabetes and prediabetes in 2012. Put another way, 1 of every 5 health care dollars were spent caring for people with diabetes.

This is one of the major reasons our health-care costs are skyrocketing out of control. By taking responsibility for our own health, we not only can improve the quality of our own lives but we can improve our society as a whole.
We’ve all heard the steps we need to take to prevent or delay diabetes: Control our weight; eat healthy foods; be active; don’t smoke. It’s the same refrain we’ve heard from our mothers and doctors for many years.

A major clinical study known as the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) found that pre-diabetics can cut their chances of getting the disease by 58 percent if they exercise 150 minutes a week and lose just 7 percent of their body weight.

Like you, I know how hard it is to follow that advice in today’s fast-paced and fast-food world. But given the serious implications of diabetes, I hope you’ll strive, like I do, to make every effort to thwart it. The good news is that even small changes can lead to big rewards.

Take Baby Steps

The ADA offers this advice for making lifestyle changes in baby steps:

1. **Accept that you have bad habits that you need to change.** Experts say that for people to change they must know they should and believe they can. If you still need motivation, learn more about the serious consequences of diabetes at the ADA website: [http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/complications/](http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/complications/)

2. **Start with changes that are easy to make.** Pick a few changes that you feel comfortable making and that will have an impact. For example, if you eat a bowl of ice cream every night, try cutting the portion in half. Better yet, try substituting a piece of fruit. Best of all, try taking a brisk, 15-minute walk instead. Each one of these changes is a step in the right direction.

3. **Keep your goals realistic and specific.** Don’t just vow to “eat healthier.” Instead, for example, plan to include two pieces of fruit in your daily diet, one at breakfast and one as an afternoon snack. If you can’t pass up the fast-food restaurant, plan to order a small fries and a single burger instead of a large fries and double burger with cheese. If you aren’t interested in joining a gym, squeeze in a brisk, 15-minute walk each day.

4. **Practice new habits faithfully.** It takes months for new habits to become a way of life. If you’re successful in making a change, reward yourself in some small way. If not, revise your goal or choose an easier one.

5. **Start the lifestyle change cycle again.** Once you’ve successfully incorporated a change, choose a new goal to work on. Slowly, goal by goal, you’ll be eating healthier and engaging in more physical activity. You’ll be at a healthier weight (even if it’s not the ideal weight you dream of), and you’ll be on the road to preventing or delaying type 2 diabetes.


To learn more about the Diabetes Prevention Program, talk to your doctor or visit the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services website at [www.dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/Diabetes/DPP](http://www.dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/Diabetes/DPP).
If you aren’t sure whether you’re at risk for diabetes, or if you need help managing the disease, contact your health-care provider.