

Rising Tide of Diabetes Among Asian Americans

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Dan Hazelwood] Welcome to this podcast on the Rising Tide of Diabetes Among Asian Americans. I'm your host, Dan Hazelwood. With me today is Dr. Jane Kelly from the National Diabetes Education Program, a joint program of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Kelly, tell us about diabetes and Asian Americans.

[Dr. Kelly] Diabetes is on the rise all over the world. Almost 21 million Americans have diabetes and the numbers continue to increase. We don't have national data on diabetes among Asian Americans, but we do have some regional statistics. For example, in California, Asians as a group were one and a half times more likely to have diagnosed diabetes, compared to non-Hispanic whites. Studies in Seattle indicate the prevalence of diabetes is 2 to 3 times higher among Japanese Americans than among non-Hispanic whites living in Seattle. Other studies show rates up to 14 percent among Asian Indian adults, a rate comparable to American Indian and Alaska Natives.

[Dan Hazelwood] How serious is diabetes?

[Dr. Kelly] Diabetes is the number one cause of amputations, kidney failure, blindness in working age adults, and a big contributor to heart attack, the number one cause of death in America. But diabetes is not just about statistics. It's about people.

[Dan Hazelwood] Joining us by phone is Ms. Vonnie May, a Cambodian American woman living with diabetes. Ms. May, can you tell us how diabetes has affected you?

[Ms. May] Diabetes (is) very scary for me. I start to have diabetes it's been about 6 years and then the first time that I had I did not pay attention much because I don't think that it really affect me, but later on, I know it very affect for my health and condition and very scary. This is a serious disease for that diabetes. One of my friends lost her eyesight because she did not, you know, take care of whatever the doctor tell her to do so, after I found out my friend, when one morning she woke up, she lost her eyesight, that's when I start to, you know, concern myself. I say I'm not afraid; I get nightmares sometimes because I am afraid this wouldn't happen, you know, the same thing like her. So then I start going to, you know, to doctors and try to take care of that.

[Dan Hazelwood] What's the one message you'd like to leave with our listeners?

[Ms. May] Try to exercise every day as you can, control to eat less rice and bread or potato, and it's important is exercise. If you try to lose some, a little bit of weight, it will reduce a lot of sugar down. And then, and then some, most Asian try to eat everything, like bitter, like vegetables, a lot of vegetables. Take the medicine consistent, you know, not to ignore that – like I, what happened to me. I just ignore the medicine. My doctor told me to take the medicine, like every day, I skip it. Diabetes very serious condition.

[Dan Hazelwood] Dr. Kelly, what can be done to prevent these complications?

[Dr. Kelly] While statistics and stories like these are worrisome, there is some good news. Most diabetes complications can be prevented. Keeping your blood glucose as close to normal as possible greatly reduces your risk of eye, kidney, and nerve disease, but if you think of diabetes as just a “sugar” disease you miss the big picture. High blood pressure and high cholesterol also contribute to cardiovascular disease, such as heart attack and stroke. We encourage people with diabetes to ask their health care team what they can do to control blood glucose, blood pressure, and blood cholesterol.

[Dan Hazelwood] What else can people do to prevent diabetes complications?

[Dr. Kelly] One of the most important things they can do is stop smoking. Tobacco use causes the blood vessels to constrict or tighten, and can lead to more complications, including vision loss, kidney disease, and heart and blood vessel disease. Diabetes and tobacco are a very bad combination. Yet we know that some groups of Asian American men, in particular, have very high tobacco use rates.

[Dan Hazelwood] I never think about Asian Americans as having diabetes.

[Dr. Kelly] Neither do many doctors or Asian Americans themselves. Some of the focus groups we’ve done with Asian Americans told us that they don’t think they are at risk for diabetes because, in general, they have a smaller body size compared to non-Asian Americans. Being overweight is a risk factor for type 2 diabetes, however, Asians are at risk at a lower body weight compared to non-Asians. For example, an Asian man who is five foot eight inches tall and weighs 155 pounds may not be considered overweight by his doctor, but in fact, for his height and weight, he is at increased risk for diabetes.

[Dan Hazelwood] Dr. Kelly, is it possible to prevent diabetes?

[Dr. Kelly] Diabetes is not like an infection. You don’t “get” diabetes by catching it from another person. It may take years for diabetes to develop. If diabetes runs in your family, there is an increased chance that you’ll develop the disease, but it doesn’t have to be that way. Diabetes can be prevented or at least delayed; it is possible to turn back the rising tide of diabetes. People at high risk for diabetes are able to prevent or delay the disease by making some changes in what they eat and by walking more. This is true in people of all ethnicities, including Asian Americans.

[Dan Hazelwood] Dr. Kelly, I didn’t realize that diabetes is such an issue among Asian Americans.

[Dr. Kelly] Diabetes is an important problem among Asian Americans, but there are things a person can do to prevent diabetes complications, and prevent or delay diabetes in the first place. We owe it to our children to stop the rising tide of diabetes. Find out what you can do. The National Diabetes Education Program has FREE materials on diabetes prevention and control in

English, and in multiple Asian languages, including Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Hmong, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Thai, and Vietnamese. Visit our website at www.YourDiabetesInfo.org or call toll-free 1-888-693-NDEP.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov, or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.