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Warning signs of Diabetes

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We have a strong family history for diabetes, but I don't have one yet. What are the early signs and symptoms of diabetes that I need to watch out for? —elmer_pago@gmail.com

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Diabetes mellitus usually has no signs or symptoms during its early stages. This is because although the persistently high blood sugar level that characterizes the disease invariably damages blood vessels and many vital organs, the damage occurs very gradually, albeit, progressively, hence, during the first few years of the disease, the involved organs still function adequately, the afflicted person does not have any symptom and he/she senses nothing wrong with him/her body.

In the Philippines, according to the 2014 prevalence estimates published by the International Diabetes Federation, there are 3.2 million cases of diabetes type 2. Of these, around 1.7 million remain undiagnosed. In other words, more than half of Filipinos with diabetes do not know they have the disease. Why? Because they have no symptoms and do not bother to have their blood sugar checked.

If untreated, however, the damage that diabetes brings to the various organs inevitably results in serious conditions whose signs and symptoms depend on the organ involved. These conditions include poor healing of wounds in the extremities, stroke, heart failure and heart attack,

kidney failure, blindness, susceptibility to infection, and nerve damage that results in muscle weakness and reduced sensation.

Warning signals you should not ignore

Although most of the definitive signs and symptoms of organ damage caused by diabetes appear years after the onset of the illness, there are nonspecific manifestations of the disease that could appear relatively early. Herewith are these warning signals, which should alert you into seeing a doctor:

- Frequent urination especially at night
- Increased thirst
- Increased hunger
- Weakness and fatigue— feeling of always being tired.
- Vision problems—the most common of which is blurry vision.
- Unexplained weight loss, which incidentally is also a frequent sign of cancers.
- Tingling and numbness in the hands and feet
- Slow-healing wounds or sores
- Frequent infections of the skin, gums, urinary tract, or vagina (in women)
- Dry, itchy or scaly skin, usually of the lower legs.
- Dark, brown or velvety patches of skin, usually seen in the folds and creases of the skin such as the neck, armpits or groin, hands, elbows, and knees.

The best way to diagnose diabetes early

The best way to detect diabetes at the earliest possible time is by undergoing a screening test for the disease on a regular basis. There are two simple blood tests used in diabetes screening: fasting blood sugar (FBS) and oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT). Your doctor can tell you which screening test is appropriate for you.

The American Diabetes Association (ADA) recommends that adults age 45 and older get screened for diabetes every three years. Those with a high risk for diabetes, however, need earlier or more frequent screening. The American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists recommends that high-risk adults get screened annually beginning at age 30.

When is a person at high risk for diabetes? If he/she is overweight (the number one risk factor for the disease) and has one or more of the other risk factors for the disorder, which include: family history of diabetes (a parent, a brother or a sister with the disease), sedentary lifestyle, history of blood glucose problems, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and lipids, history of vascular disease, metabolic syndrome, or certain autoimmune disease, intake of certain medications such as steroids, and, in women, polycystic ovary syndrome, and history of gestational diabetes (i.e., exhibiting high blood glucose levels during pregnancy) or delivering a baby that weighs over nine pounds.

Incidentally, there are two types of diabetes, types 1 and 2.

Diabetes type 1, which usually arises in childhood, accounts for only five to 10 percent of diabetes cases. It occurs when the cells of the pancreas that produce insulin are destroyed by illness or by the body's own immune system. Diabetes type 2, on the other hand, accounts for 90 to 95 percent of diabetes. It is what we usually refer to when we say diabetes, and is the subject of the discussion above. It usually arises in adulthood from the interplay of genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors, mainly overweight or obesity and physical inactivity.

Diabetes type 2 has a gradual onset. In contrast, type 1 diabetes often develops rather quickly. Its symptoms, albeit similar to those of type 2 diabetes, appear suddenly.