

Women and diabetes in the spotlight this November

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Over the past decades, the rise of diabetes around the world has been so prevalent and extreme, it is sometimes referred to as *the* epidemic of our modern times. In 2017, the diabetes focus theme is [Women and Diabetes](#). Globally, diabetes is the ninth leading cause of death in women, resulting in 2.1 million deaths each year. It is estimated that there are currently more than 199 million women living with diabetes, and by 2040, this total is expected to reach over 310 million.



Registered dietitian and [ADSA \(the Association for Dietetics in South Africa\)](#) spokesperson, Ria Catsicas, says, “According to the latest mortality report for South Africa released earlier this year, diabetes is ranked as the leading cause of death in women, and the most important risk factor for developing Type 2 diabetes is obesity. At this time, more than 60% of South African women are either overweight or obese, putting them at higher risk than men of developing diabetes in the future.”

Gender also means that women experience additional health risks due to obesity. As Ria notes: “Almost 17% of pregnant South African women experience gestational diabetes which is directly related to obesity. This condition puts them at risk of experiencing high blood pressure during their pregnancy, miscarriages and still birth. In addition, the babies of mothers-to-be with gestational diabetes tend to be large which can contribute to complications during birth and are themselves at a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes later in life. Obesity also plays a role in increasing the risks of female infertility.”

Optimal nutrition is key for the person with diabetes; it is also crucial for those who may not have diabetes yet, but are insulin-resistant and those with a family history of diabetes, as genetics are also a risk. Optimal nutrition is also essential for all women – up to 70% of cases of type 2 diabetes can be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle.

Type 1 diabetes is managed by medication (injectable insulin and or tablets), a controlled diet and exercise; but when it comes to type 2 diabetes, good nutrition along with other healthy lifestyle changes are usually the first line of treatment to manage diabetes, and if medication is required, a healthy diet can complement and often influence the medicine, to help avoid experiencing the life-threatening complications of diabetes. Tabitha Hume, also a registered dietitian and ADSA spokesperson, points out that commonsense healthy lifestyle changes can be a vital safeguard. “Balanced meals that are made up of a combination of high fibre, low-GI carbohydrates, lean protein and healthy plant fats with generous helpings of vegetables and salads and some fruit (in controlled portions) can be a general guide. However, plasma glucose control is very individual, depending on the severity of the diabetes, and the type and dosage of medication being used. Diabetics will need the help of a registered clinical dietitian who can support them in translating these guidelines into the practical meal

plans that best suit their food culture, their taste preferences, daily routines and lifestyles."

ADSA spokesperson Nasreen Jaffer agrees, "There is no 'one size fits all'. In order to make a sustainable change to a healthier eating plan, all aspects of a person's life must be taken into account. A working mom with kids at school does not have the same amount of time for food planning and preparation compared to a stay-at-home mom. It is the role of the dietitian to help tailor an eating plan that is healthy – as well as practical, affordable and do-able for the individual."

All three experts agree that this year's World Diabetes Day focus on women is relevant to the adoption of healthy lifestyles across South Africa's population. While many men play a prominent nurturing role in the home, and many are becoming increasingly interested in the impact of nutrition on health and physical performance, it is still common for women to take the dominant role in the nourishing of the family, and ensuring health and disease prevention.

Tabitha points out: "Since women are most often the home chef, the grocery shopper, and the planner of meals and snacks for children and the family, if nutrition education is targeted at women, there is a higher chance that healthy nutrition guidelines filter through the whole family and have the biggest impact. Family traditions, practices and cultures most often derive from the mother in a family which is why children often adopt the religion and language of the mother. This is where the 'Mother Tongue' phrase originates. South African women are encouraged to develop a 'Mother Meal' concept moving forward, helping to instil healthy eating habits in children from a young age."

World Diabetes Day on 14 November aims to shine a light on the risks for developing diabetes; as well as the needs for regular screening, access to information, self-management education, treatments and support, which includes optimal nutrition.

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