

Living with Diabetes

By Sinisa Vujkovic, MD

When patients are faced with managing a chronic disease like diabetes, they have an important commitment to make to themselves and their health. I tell my patients – do it for yourself, not for your doctor.

But I am here to help, along with a team of caregivers at the Duluth Clinic-Superior who assist diabetic patients with every step of their care. Our team approach is working. Of the 1,200 patients here who are currently being treated for diabetes, about 70% have their blood sugars well under control.

It's important to take good care of your health if you have diabetes. Left unchecked, diabetes leads to an increased risk of heart attack, heart disease and stroke. It can impair circulation, which can lead to amputation of the toes or foot. Healing after a cut and resisting infections is more difficult for diabetics, too.

With simple lifestyle changes, diabetes can be successfully managed for many patients. Healthy habits are the most important part of the equation. That includes a well balanced diet, exercise, and avoidance of tobacco use.

Other major component of managing diabetes is medications, which can mean a pill or an injection (or a combination of both.) But the perception that diabetics have to poke themselves five times a day is simply not true. Advances in medication options are making it easier than ever to get your insulin, even when you're out in public.

I advise my diabetic patients to eat three to four smaller meals a day. I recommend a Mediterranean-style diet. Here's another tip: When you're out in a restaurant, eat only half of your meal, and save the rest. While diabetics must avoid sweets, there are some tasty sugar-free alternatives when it comes time for a little dessert.

Exercise also is important in managing diabetes. People with diabetes should be exercising 20-30 minutes a day, or about three hours a week. It's also important to have regular checkups to make sure cholesterol, blood sugars and blood pressure are under control.

For diabetic patients who have struggled with weight control and failed, weight loss surgery may be an option. I've had patients who have been able to significantly reduce the number of medications they need for diabetes or high blood pressure after the surgery. Weight loss surgery also helps to prevent future health complications related to diabetes and obesity.

Managing your diabetes doesn't have to be an overwhelming job. We've got many valuable resources here at Duluth Clinic-Superior to help. Nurses in the diabetes center provide education about diet, blood sugar monitoring and medications. They are ready to answer questions and help track a patient's ongoing care.

Along with the internal medicine specialists, we have nurse practitioners who can see a patient quickly and a diabetologist who comes from Duluth to see patients in Superior. Patients interested in weight loss surgery can learn more about their options and have their operation here in Superior, thanks to an expansion of the Duluth Clinic Weight Management Program. And with our electronic medical record system, we can keep track of your health needs with the click of a mouse.

November is Diabetes Awareness Month, but a healthy understanding about managing diabetes is important year-round. It's up to you to engage in the healthy habits needed to manage this chronic condition. Here at the Duluth Clinic-Superior, we're ready to support you on your path to good health.

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