

How to Reverse Type 2 Diabetes

Learn the lifestyle changes that can get rid of your type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes can't be cured, but it can be reversed by eating right and exercising regularly. Do what Karen Parrish, 53, did: Take control of your disease rather than letting your disease control you.

Parrish received her diagnosis of type 2 diabetes with little surprise. Both sides of her family have a history of the disease, and she knew the consequences of ignoring it.

Still, Parrish, didn't fully commit to the lifestyle changes necessary to get her diabetes under control.

"Knowing what you have to do is not the problem," says Parrish, an antiques seller in Sharpsville, Pa. "The problem is doing it."

Is Your Type 2 Diabetes Under Control? Get Your Health Score

Fear Factor

In early April 2010, Parrish learned that her blood sugar levels were off the charts. The disease had begun to damage her eyes, threatening her with blindness, not to mention the heart problems, kidney failure, stroke, and other serious health concerns that come with diabetes.

"The blood work was so bad it scared me," she says. "Now, I'm trying really hard."

The payoff has been a big one. Significant changes to her diet, trips to the pool, and regular walks have helped put her diabetes in retreat. For people like Parrish with type 2 diabetes - the vast majority of the estimated 23.6 million people with diabetes in the U.S. - there's no better prescription than eating right and exercising.

"If you take obesity out of the picture, your diabetes will improve dramatically," says Osama Hamdy, MD, PhD, the medical director of the Obesity Clinical Program at the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston.

Watch What You Eat

Parrish began her new routine by eliminating many of her favorite foods from her diet: pizza, mashed potatoes, potato chips.

"I am really watching what I put it in my mouth," she says. "Before, all I ate were carbs."

Lowering carb intake is crucial, says Betul Hatipoglu, MD, an endocrinologist at the Cleveland Clinic, because too many carbohydrates will cause your blood sugar levels to spike. But dealing with diabetes requires paying attention to your whole diet.

Here are some quick tips from Hamdy and Hatipoglu:

- Pass on the peas, corn, carrots, and other starchy vegetables. Focus instead on leafy greens.
- Get most of your protein from poultry rather than red meat.
- Eat oily fish twice a week - it's full of healthy fat.
- Pick breads that have a lot of fiber.
- Learn to read nutrition labels.
- Make an appointment with a dietitian or nutritionist. They are often covered by insurance.

Eating the right foods is essential, but so is eating the right amount. Hamdy says that people with diabetes who are overweight - and most are - should expect to cut 700 to 1,000 calories from their daily diet. He recommends healthy meal replacements because portion control is built in.

"That's a jump-start to weight loss," Hamdy says. "It's very good for beginners."

Keep on Moving

"The best prescription is exercise," Hatipoglu says. "That is the No. 1 thing you can do."

Aside from helping you lose weight and build muscle, exercise stimulates insulin sensitivity, enabling the body to better manage its blood sugar.

Hatipoglu recognizes that many, if not most, of her patients have never exercised. She tells them to start slowly.

"The goal is 150 minutes of exercise per week, but that is a big mountain to climb at first," she says. "Start with five minutes a day, and work slowly up from there. ... You don't have to run a marathon."

The key is to keep your routine simple and varied, says Hamdy. He recommends:

- 10 minutes of stretching and aerobics (climbing the stairs at home, for example) in the morning
- 10 minutes of walking at lunchtime
- 10 minutes with resistance bands or dumbbells in the evening

Whatever you decide to do, know your limits.

If you are quite overweight, you might find cardio exercises too difficult. In that case, start with strength training, advises Hamdy. Better still, start with a visit to your doctor and talk to her about what you can and can't do.

More Motivation, Less Medication

"Remission," says Hamdy, "can be prolonged by maintaining a good diet and regular exercise."

People with type 2 diabetes who eat right and keep fit can often hold the disease at bay without the aid of medication or insulin. But having a plan and sticking with it are two different things.

Tracking her progress motivates Parrish.

"I write down every single calorie and carb gram and add them up at the end of the day," she says. "It was when I stopped doing that that I began to gain weight."

Motivation is a key to long-term success, and the best way to maintain motivation, says Hamdy, is to set achievable goals.

"Patients are motivated when they see the effects immediately," he says. "And when they see improvement, they become even more motivated."

That's been Parrish's experience. So far, she has shed 10 pounds through diet and exercise. And she says she is just getting started.

"I feel like I'm getting in control now," she says. "I have a tendency to let things get so bad that it scares me, but once I get jolted, I have the willpower to change."

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