

Watch your diet to beat diabetes

Today is World Diabetes Day and as one of the most prevalent and under-diagnosed diseases in Africa, there is emphasis on prevention and early detection – as there is no cure for diabetes and it can lead to numerous other diseases.

Omeshnie Naidoo reports

MORE than two million South Africans are said to have diabetes. Dr Lebo Masunyane, a clinical research physician in endocrinology for pharmaceutical Eli Lilly South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, explains that diabetes is a complex disorder of carbohydrate, fat and protein metabolism (breakdown) that is primarily a result of a deficiency or complete lack of insulin secretion by the pancreas, or resistance to insulin.

Insulin is a hormone produced in the pancreas that allows glucose from food to enter the body's cells, where it is converted into energy needed by muscles and tissues to function.

A person with diabetes does not absorb glucose properly, and glucose remains circulating in the blood, damaging body tissues over time. This damage can lead to disabling and life-threatening health complications.

Bridget McNulty, the editor of Sweet Life diabetes lifestyle magazine, says knowing the symptoms of diabetes can be a lifesaver.

Type 1 diabetes often develops suddenly and can produce symptoms such as: abnormal thirst and a dry mouth, frequent urination, lack of energy, extreme tiredness, constant hunger, sudden weight loss, slow-healing wounds, recurrent infections and blurred vision.

About 90 percent of all cases of diabetes are Type 2, characterised by insulin resistance or deficiency. Risk factors include obesity, poor diet, physical inactivity, advancing age, family history of diabetes, ethnicity and high blood glucose during pregnancy affecting the unborn child. Until recently, this type of diabetes was seen only in adults but it is now also occurring in children.

"Gestational diabetes, which appears during pregnancy, can lead to serious health risks to the mother and her infant and increases the risk for developing Type 2 diabetes later in life," said Masunyane.

Heart attacks, strokes, kidney failure, eye disease and blindness, nerve damage and amputations are among the horrendous health problems

linked to diabetes, adds specialist physician Dr Adri Kok.

Masunyane suggests keeping a food diary to begin your course of action.

This is an invaluable tool to get a good look at your eating habits so you have a realistic base line from which to make improvements.

The average male needs about 2 500 calories a day to keep his weight constant, while the average female needs 2 000.

Watch your portion sizes. Your plate should be half-filled with vegetables or salad, with the rest of the plate divided between protein foods.

Eat less than 6g of salt a day. As far as possible, eat food close to its natural state.

Cut back on alcohol, or leave it out altogether.

Eat grilled chicken and oily fish such as mackerel, sardines, salmon and trout which are rich in omega-3 (polyunsaturated fat) and help protect against heart disease.

Plan your meals, packed lunches and snacks. Reduce the temptation to eat fast foods and unhealthy substitutes.

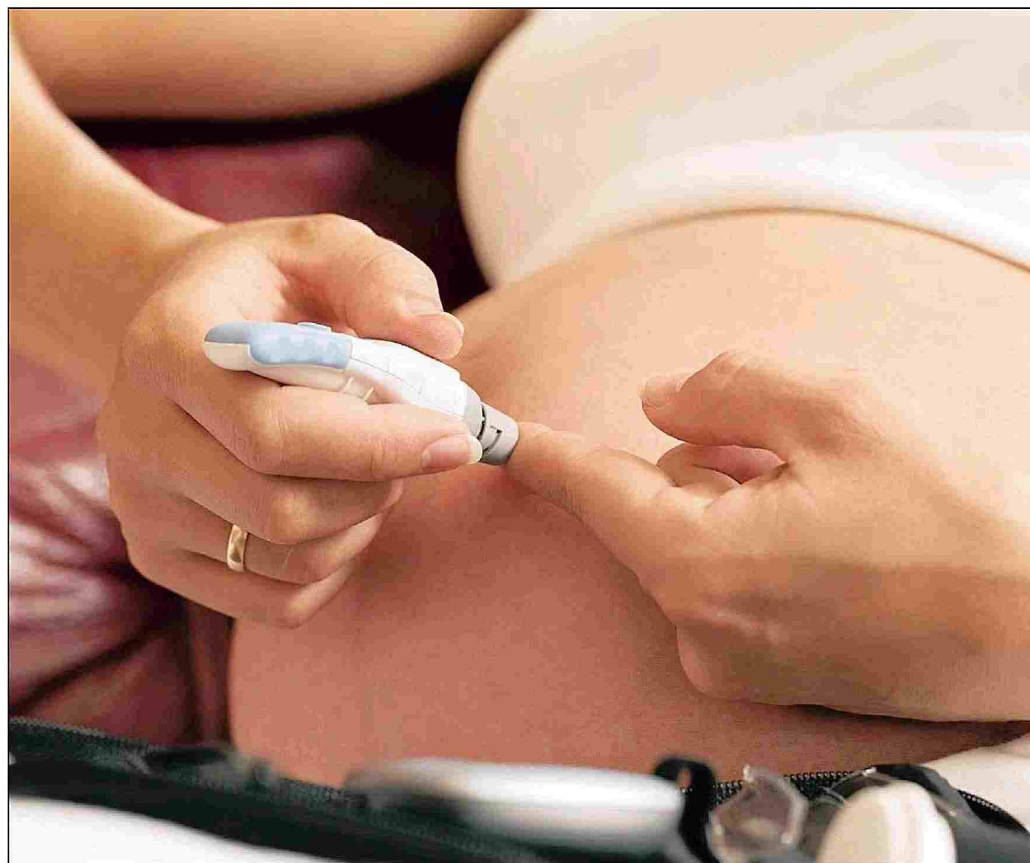
Woolworths dietician Cindy Chin warns that the current "low carb" trend can result in the body not getting all the nutrients needed for good health.

"Carbohydrates provide fuel for the body, but they also provide fibre and essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals to a daily diet, particularly those from whole grain and high-fibre sources.

"Controlled intake of all carbohydrate-rich foods is important, and these foods include starches, fruit, legumes and dairy products.

"Sugars obtained from fruits, vegetables and dairy products, in the correct quantities, are perfectly acceptable for diabetics. All carbohydrate is converted into glucose – sugary and starchy carbohydrate. And for optimal blood glucose regulation, the total amount of carbohydrate consumed should be controlled.

She says: "The dietary guidelines for people with diabetes are very similar to those recommended for everyone else."



The International Diabetes Federation (IDF) estimates that there are 382 million people with diabetes worldwide, and this is expected to increase to 592 million by 2035.