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Americans ignore diabetes risk

By Anita Manning
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A new survey finds that most Americans believe diabetes is a major health problem — for somebody else.

Seventy-one percent of the 1,055 adults polled in a telephone survey say diabetes is a serious problem in the USA, but 80% have never discussed it with a physician, and 67% say they're not concerned about developing the disease.

Overall, 39% of those polled in the survey, conducted for drug company Hoffman-LaRoche, say they're overweight — a risk factor for type 2 diabetes.

But the percentages are higher among the middle-aged: 47% of those ages 45-54 say they're overweight, and 53% of the 55-64 age group consider themselves overweight. Yet, in those groups, only 30% and 36%, respectively, are concerned about developing diabetes.

In a companion survey of 300 doctors, 63% report a steady increase in the number of patients who are overweight; 16% say the increase has been dramatic. When asked what concerns them about the growing girth of patients, doctors cite the heightened risk of diabetes most often (59%), followed by increased risk of heart attack (46%) and stroke (18%).

"Many people recognize that they are overweight, but the American population does not seem to recognize the connection between being overweight and the risk of type 2 diabetes," says obesity expert Steven Heymsfield, professor of medicine at Columbia University, College of Physicians and Sur-

geons. He says 80% of people with type 2 diabetes are overweight, and an estimated 6% of non-diabetic people who are overweight will develop diabetes each year.

"As one becomes heavier, it puts greater demands on the body's mechanism for controlling blood sugar," says Heymsfield, who is deputy director of the Obesity Research

Center at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York. "Eventually those mechanisms fail, leading to (diabetes). It doesn't happen to everybody, but it happens in a fairly high percentage of people who are overweight."

He advises people to talk to their doctors about diabetes. "We know that lifestyle changes, including diet and exercise, can reduce the risk."

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Type 2 diabetes affects 95% of the more than 16 million Americans who suffer from the disease, which is caused by the body's inability to make or properly use the hormone insulin. Type 1 diabetes occurs in childhood as a result of the destruction of insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. Type 2 usually is diagnosed in middle age, but as obesity has increased among children and teens, the rate of type 2 diabetes in young people has risen.

Twenty years ago, only 2% of children diagnosed with diabetes had type 2, says endocrinologist Gerald Bernstein of Beth Israel Hospital in New York, a past president of the American Diabetes Association. Today, he says, it accounts for 30% to 50% of new diagnoses among children 9 to 19.

Bernstein foresees a public health crisis: "I think that, in 25 years, we will see 50 million people with diabetes."