Diabetes diagnosis leads to weight loss

New study challenges conventional views by showing that people lose weight in the years after being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

It is a well-established fact that obesity and type 2 diabetes are connected. If you have lived a little too well and have become overweight then you are at risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Until now, many have believed that diabetics have difficulty losing weight, and research has shown that many continue to gain weight after they are diagnosed.

A new study has now shaken that belief by demonstrating that diabetics actually lose some of the excess weight in the years after diagnosis, regardless of their age or weight before they were diagnosed. It seems that for these people, a diabetes diagnosis somehow leads to weight loss.

"Obesity is the greatest risk factor for type 2 diabetes, and most patients have gained weight in the years prior to their diagnosis," says Rasmus Køster-Rasmussen, MD, a Ph.D. from Copenhagen University's Research Unit for General Practice.

"Our study shows that no matter how much [weight] they’ve gained ten years prior to the diagnosis, they, on average, lose weight after having been diagnosed," he says.

Diabetics lose weight

In the study, which has just been published in the international scientific journal PlosOne, Øster-Rasmussen and colleagues observed weight development in 885 patients with type 2 diabetes who had been diagnosed after the age of 40.

Patients were weighed immediately after being diagnosed with the disease and again six years after they had started treatment. They were also asked how much they weighed 1, 10, and 20 years before they were diagnosed.

Six years after the patients were diagnosed they had lost, on average 2.5 kg in weight.

A diagnosis may promote motivation

According to Køster-Rasmussen, the result is surprising because a previous study had shown that diabetes patients continue to gain weight after they have been give the diagnosis.

"Therefore, many doctors have the idea that it’s difficult to get patients to lose weight, but this study shows that it’s possible," says Køster-Rasmussen.

The new study gives no answers as to how or why diabetics lose weight.
New individual treatment works

Henning Beck-Nielsen, professor of endocrinology at the University of Southern Denmark has an idea why the diabetes patients who participated in the new study lost weight. He puts it down to a change in the way doctors treat patients with type 2 diabetes.

"In the past, it was thought that all diabetic patients should have a blood sugar level of less than 6.5 per cent. If the patient's blood sugar did not fall enough, the doctor would give more insulin, and this often meant that the patients gained weight," says Beck-Nielsen.

"Today, doctors take individual circumstances into account for each patient, and we have found out that it’s not universally beneficial for all patients to come down to this normal blood sugar level," he says.

Weight gain increases the risk of further complications

If you have type 2 diabetes, you must be particularly careful with your weight because you risk developing a number of complications.

"Many type 2 diabetics are overweight, and it is important that they don’t gain even more when they start treatment. Extra weight gain increases the risk of other health problems such as blood clots and heart disease," says Beck-Nielsen.

"Today, doctors adjust insulin doses for individual patients, to avoid the risk of further weight gain. Some patients have difficulty getting blood sugar down to a normal level, but we’ve found that it may be more appropriate to have a slightly elevated blood sugar level rather than increasing insulin doses, which can lead to patients putting on even more weight. Doctors are no longer so focused on getting it down to 6.5 per cent in all patients," he says.

Unlike in the past where they set a single blood sugar goal for all diabetic patients, doctors now prefer to set targets for each patient individually.

This comes in many forms. For example, patient age and weight, amongst other things, as well as individual diet and exercise plans.

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