

Prediabetes: A Hidden Volcano

About 120,000 people die in Pakistan each year as a result of diabetes-related complications.¹ According to the International Diabetes Federation, in 2022, 26.7% of adults in Pakistan are affected by diabetes making the total number of cases approximately 33,000,000. The prevalence of prediabetes is increasing worldwide, and it is projected that more than 470 million people will have prediabetes in 2030.² Prediabetes is a serious health condition where blood sugar levels are higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. Of those with prediabetes, more than 90% do not know they have it. Prediabetes puts a person at increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, cardiac diseases, and stroke.³

People get fooled by the word “pre” and do not take it seriously. Prediabetes flies under the radar. A person can have prediabetes for years without symptoms. This means a person likely will not know that he has prediabetes until serious health problems show up. Having prediabetes dramatically increases the chance of developing type 2 diabetes and other serious health conditions. People must learn about their prediabetes risk, be screened regularly and take the steps necessary to delay or prevent type 2 diabetes.⁴

The risk factors for prediabetes include being overweight, age 45 years or older, having a parent, brother, or sister with type 2 diabetes, being physically active less than three times a week, having diabetes during pregnancy or giving birth to a baby who weighed more than 9 pounds. Screening is one of the vital management strategies to combat prediabetes. You can get a simple blood sugar test to find out if you have prediabetes and consult your physician for further HbA1c test.⁵

Think of prediabetes as a fork in the road. If you ignore it, your risk for type 2 diabetes goes up. With simple, proven lifestyle changes, you can prevent or delay prediabetes from turning

into type 2 diabetes. For prediabetic individuals, lifestyle modification is the cornerstone of diabetes prevention, with evidence of 40%–70% risk reduction. Lose a modest amount of weight and get regular physical activity, and your risk goes down. Modest weight loss means 5 to 7% of body weight. A healthy diet can significantly improve blood glucose and assist in weight control for most patients. Regular physical activity means getting at least 150 minutes a week of brisk walking or similar activity. That is just 30 minutes a day, five days a week. Progression to diabetes can be checked with a good diet, smoking cessation and a regular exercise routine. Up to a 58% reduction in the development of diabetes could be achieved if prediabetes is controlled effectively.^{2,4}

Prediabetes screening is also an early warning for overweight people to get tested, especially if they suffer from other additional risk factors such as high blood pressure, high triglycerides or a family history of diabetes. Diabetes affects all segments of society, including the low, middle and upper socioeconomic groups. Education and prevention are keys to fighting diabetes. Four out of five individuals with diabetes worldwide live in middle or low-income countries; half of them are unaware of their condition. Screening for prediabetes is one essential step in combating diabetes, as more than 10% of the people with prediabetes become diabetic within three years.⁵

Once diabetes is established, it affects every major organ in the body. People with diabetes often develop major complications, including kidney failure, blindness, and nerve damage. Nerve damage can lead to amputation of a toe, foot, or leg. Having diabetes can also double the risk of depression. That risk increases as more diabetes-related health problems develop. All can sharply reduce the quality of life.⁴

Despite extensive research being done internationally, the healthcare system in Pakistan

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has sadly ignored this critical condition. We do not have much data about prediabetes prevalence in Pakistan, although our South Asian ethnicity puts us at a higher risk. It becomes more important when we find sedentary lifestyles, changing dietary patterns and lack of awareness contributing to the increased risk of obesity in our population. It is crucial to consider the role of preventive medicine because of the massive financial burden posed by chronic diseases such as diabetes in a developing country like Pakistan.

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