Does Diabetes Increase the Risk of Digestive Disorders?

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Diabetes and Digestive Disorders

Diabetes is a systemic disorder with far-reaching consequences. Not only can it disturb the pancreas, liver, and stomach, but the entire digestive system can falter from nerve damage and chemical imbalances.

In fact, a number of processes tied to diabetes can inflame, infect, or otherwise irritate the intestines, which often results in constipation or diarrhea. Without the proper care and treatment, these can turn into chronic discomforts, and underlying conditions could continue to cause more damage. Let's look at the link between diabetes and diarrhea and constipation, and what you can do about it.

Why Diabetes Raises the Risk of Digestive Disorders

Up to 75% of diabetics will experience GI distress at some point, whether it’s acid reflux, gastroparesis, nausea, irritable bowel syndrome, or simply a sensitivity to certain foods. Symptoms can be mild or more regular, and certain aspects and side effects of diabetes will increase your risk of developing stomach and bowel problems:

- A history of neuropathy (nerve damage, often occurring in the feet) or retinopathy (damage to the retina of the eye) increases your chances of digestive distress.
- Having diabetes for a long time. Your chances of GI problems spike after 10 years, but those with type 1 diabetes are at greater risk for intestinal nerve damage.
- Poor glycemic control over a long time can damage a range of nerves and tissues, including those of the digestive tract.

Gastroparesis is perhaps the worst digestive problem for diabetics: the stomach takes too long to empty its contents, resulting in an array of uncomfortable symptoms, like nausea and vomiting. However, diabetes can affect the bowel almost as often as it affects the stomach, causing either constipation or diarrhea.

Diabetes and Constipation

Though generally not as serious as other conditions, constipation is one of the most common digestive complaints among diabetics. Although not a lot is known about the connection between diabetes and the large intestine (colon), experts suggest that enteric neuropathy – or, damage to the nerves in the intestines – is likely to blame. Enteric nerve damage can impede the natural contractions of the colon so waste products move too slowly, leading to infrequent and difficult bowel movements.

Aside from nerve damage, constipation can be traced to certain medications or a change in your diet. Sometimes the cause is as simple as dehydration, but there are times when constipation can point to a more serious underlying condition. If your constipation has worsened, you feel persistent abdominal pain, or you’re uncomfortably bloated, your doctor may want to conduct some tests.

What Causes Diabetic Diarrhea?

When you suffer from either type of diabetes, diarrhea can stem from a variety of problems with the intestines. Some of the most common problems are:

- **Enteric nerve damage**. After living with diabetes for many years, you may sustain damage to the nerves in your small intestine, which will interfere with your natural secretion and absorption processes. This can result in abdominal pain, bloating and diarrhea.
- **Bacterial overgrowth**. Nausea and vomiting occur when the stomach doesn't empty as frequently as it should, but in some cases, fluids accumulate in the small intestine. In this case, the stagnant fluids and digested food can breed bacteria, and that overgrowth can lead to cramping and diarrhea.
- **Celiac disease**. Research shows that diabetes patients have an increased risk of developing celiac disease (or celiac sprue), which is an allergy to wheat gluten. Gluten intolerance frequently brings symptoms like weight loss and diarrhea, as the mucus membrane in the small intestine becomes inflamed and begins to thin.

There is also a condition known as diabetic diarrhea, which refers to the frequent and persistent diarrhea that up to 25% of diabetics experience. Doctors suspect a few different causes, like rapid transit of fluids in the colon, abnormalities in the absorption and secretion of colonic fluid. IBS is another common condition that could cause chronic diarrhea in diabetes patients.

Reducing GI Problems with Diabetes

Since so many digestive problems can be affiliated with diabetes but can also stem from another condition, it may take time to develop a thorough and long-lasting treatment plan. The good news is that there are plenty of pharmaceutical and lifestyle options to help you cope, and hopefully eradicate your digestive troubles for good:

- **Find the right treatment**. If a dietary intolerance is bothering your system, you may need to use an elimination diet to figure out what food is to blame. But if it's an infection or bacteria overgrowth, you will almost certainly need a course of antibiotics to clear it up. Enteric neuropathy can be tough to treat, but the right pain relievers can often reduce the discomfort. The bottom line is that you and your doctor should take some time to determine the cause of your digestive troubles, instead of merely treating the prominent symptoms.

- **Better blood sugar control**. High blood glucose levels can bring a host of problems, including a significantly higher risk of GI problems. High blood sugar can decrease hydration, which limits the amount of water in the bowel and leads to constipation. But poor glycemic control also leads to more nerve damage, which can have lasting effects on intestinal motility – the speed that your intestines move and eliminate waste. In turn, the most important step to better digestion and abdominal comfort is better blood sugar management, so make self-monitoring and swift treatment a priority.
- **Improve your diet**. Adjusting your intake of various compounds and nutrients can make a big difference for your intestines. If your doctor has diagnosed you with a gluten intolerance but you suffer form constipation, it's vital that you increase the amount of fresh vegetables and fruit in your diet, since you won't be able to get insoluble fiber from wheat. If diarrhea is the problem, you'll want to increase the bulk of your bowel movements: bran can be helpful, and both bananas and blueberries contain pectin, a soluble fiber that helps to absorb liquid and move stool smoothly.

There are a number of over-the-counter remedies that target constipation and diarrhea, and they can be helpful to control your daily symptoms. But before you add another medication to your regular routine, be sure to discuss the pros and cons with your doctor, especially if you're currently treating conditions other than your diabetes. Medications can interact with each other in uncomfortable, and even dangerous ways.