Understanding the Link Between Diabetes and Appetite

by AFRA WILLMORE

Diabetes and Appetite: Why Has My Appetite Changed?

One of the odd things about diabetes is that it can cause people to lose their appetite, or conversely, can cause them to feel hungrier than usual.

Both extremes are usually a warning sign of some possible issue to your health so it's important (even if you have not been diagnosed with diabetes) to know about how your appetite can signify a potentially more serious health problem.

What Causes a Loss of Appetite With Diabetes?

Many people would be delighted to lose their appetite if that made it easier to lose some weight, but when appetite loss is linked to diabetes it can be dangerous.

Gastroparesis

One possible cause of loss of appetite is gastroparesis, a condition where food moves too slowly through the digestive tract.

This happens when over time high blood glucose levels damage the vagus nerve — the nerve that supplies nerve fibers to the pharynx (throat), larynx (voice box), trachea (windpipe), lungs, heart, esophagus, and intestinal tract.

When this occurs, the muscles in the gut can no longer move food easily out of the stomach into the small intestine to continue the digestion process. This state is called gastroparesis.

As well as loss of appetite, symptoms of gastroparesis include weight loss, heartburn, abdominal bloating, reflux, nausea and vomiting undigested food. Additional symptoms might present as high or low blood glucose levels and stomach spasms. The condition makes blood glucose levels more difficult to control.

Ketoacidosis

Another diabetes-related condition that can cause appetite loss is diabetic ketoacidosis — a complication that occurs when hyperglycemia (high blood sugar) goes untreated and high levels of ketones build up in the blood and urine.

When your body does not produce enough insulin, the cells are unable to use glucose for fuel. As a result, the body begins breaking down fat for energy, a process that produces ketones.

Although the first symptoms of hyperglycemia can develop slowly, diabetic ketoacidosis is a medical emergency.

As well as loss of appetite, symptoms to look out for include significant weight loss, frequent urination and confusion. Vomiting is another sign of ketoacidosis that requires immediate medical attention as loss of consciousness and coma can occur.

Increase in Appetite

You might be more concerned that rather than decreasing, your appetite seems to have increased.

Are you hungry all of the time? Has your appetite increased dramatically so that you are still hungry even after you have eaten? You might have polyphagia.

It's a funny word. Wikipedia explains: "It derives from the Greek words ????? (polys) which means "very much" or "many", and ???? (phago) meaning "eating" or "devouring".

Polyphagia is the medical term used to describe excessive hunger or increased appetite. It's not always caused by diabetes but it is one of the symptoms doctors look out for when diagnosing the condition, particularly when it is not in response to normal things such as intensive exercise or other strenuous activity.

Also known as hyperphagia, it is one of the three main symptoms of diabetes, along with polydipsia (increased thirst) and polyuria (frequent, excessive urination.) Doctors sometimes refer to this trio as "the three Ps."

Other Factors That Can Impact Appetite

Obviously, sometimes you can feel hungrier simply because you are exercising more frequently or more intensely, or you might just be tempted by your favorite foods being available on holiday or at a party. People sometimes eat when they are not hungry as a comfort response when they are stressed, depressed or anxious.

Some people actually lose their appetite through depression or stress, or might go off food because they are worried or excited about a change in their life — remember meeting "the one," being "lovesick" and going right off your food?

Planning a wedding, expecting a baby, moving house or starting a new job can all cause your appetite to alter temporarily, too, so if you realize you are not feeling hungry or that you are always hungry take a look at your lifestyle and see if you can find an explanation for the change in your eating habits.

It might be helpful to keep a food diary for a while, about a week or so. This will be useful if you decide to consult a doctor who will then be able to see exactly how much or little you have been eating. It might be that actually, you are eating more (or less) than you think which should reassure you. If the diary confirms your suspicions you can take it along to your appointment with a doctor.

If you have not already been diagnosed with diabetes your doctor will probably run some tests, including a simple blood test, to check your blood glucose levels. If you have been diagnosed with diabetes it is still worth consulting someone from your healthcare team if your appetite changes dramatically, especially if you feel unwell.

If you check your own blood glucose make sure the record of your finger prick tests is up to date. Regular high or low readings should be reported sooner rather than later.

It might be that your healthcare provider simply needs to tweak your management plan — adding or changing drugs or doses if necessary to keep blood glucose stable.

Even if your readings appear normal it might still be worth mentioning your change in appetite at your next scheduled appointment. Blood test meters occasionally malfunction or there might be other reasons your eating habits have altered.

Better to be safe than sorry — well-managed diabetes means less likelihood of potentially serious complications.