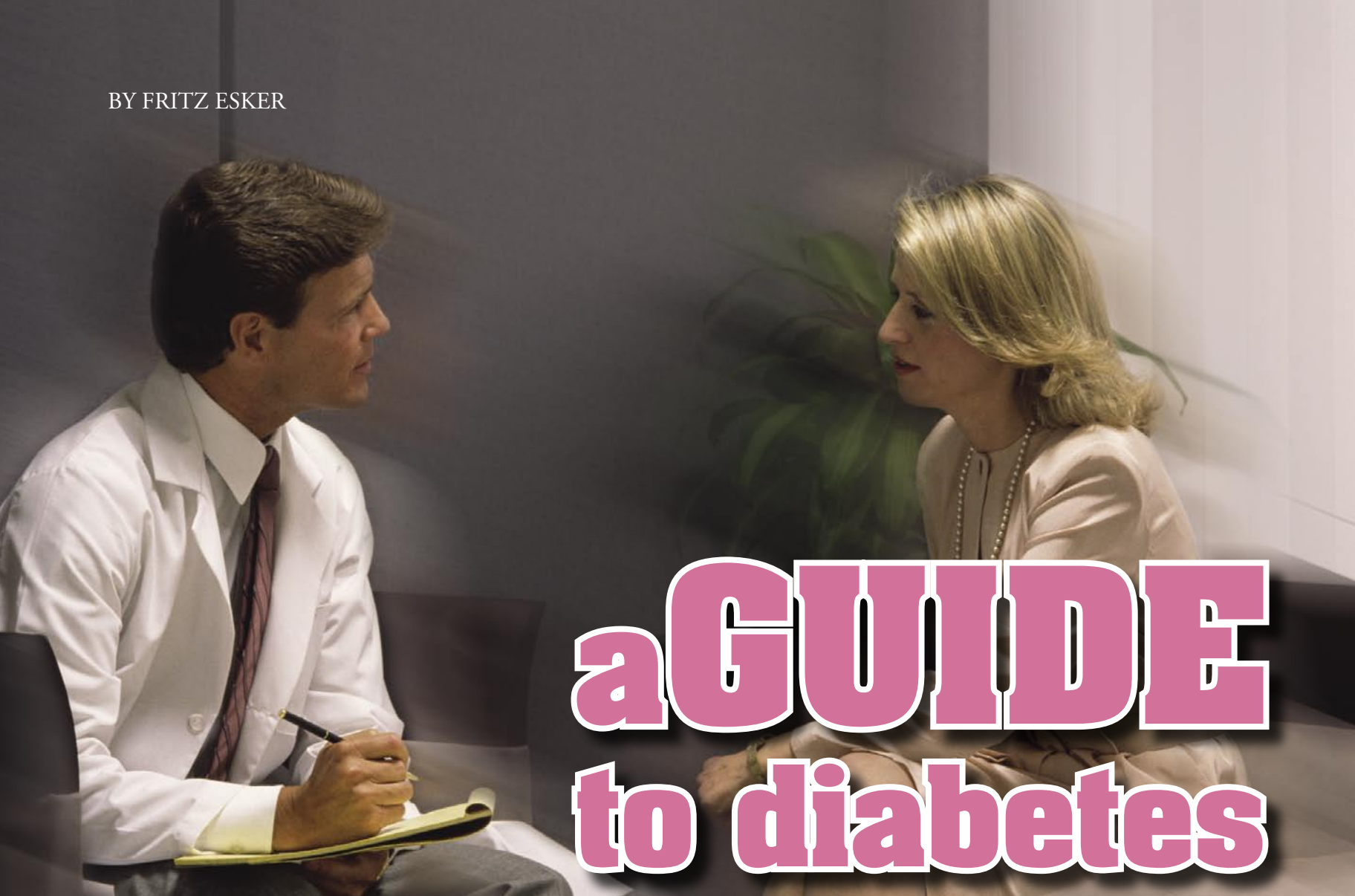


BY FRITZ ESKER



# a GUIDE to diabetes

While diabetes is nothing new, it is a disease that continues to gain a foothold in the United States and across the world, in large part due to increased obesity. Not all diabetes cases are linked to obesity, but many are. The numbers are eye opening. According to the American Diabetes Association ([www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)), approximately 23.6 million Americans have diabetes (that's 8% of the

population). 24% of these cases are undiagnosed. While these are staggering numbers, there have been signs of improvement as the number of undiagnosed cases has dropped to 24% from 30% in 2005 and 50% in 1998. However, the cost of diabetes is still high. In 2007, the total estimated economic cost of diabetes in the United States was \$174 billion.

## **the nuts and bolts**

Diabetes comes in two forms: type 1 and type 2. Type 1, also known as juvenile diabetes, is the rarer form and it usually strikes children or young adults. With this variant of the disease, the pancreas does not produce any insulin at all. Insulin is a hormone required to convert sugar into energy the body needs in day-to-day living. Type 2 diabetes occurs when the body either does not produce enough insulin, or the body's cells ignore the insulin. According to Dr. Samuel Andrews, director of clinical diabetes at Ochsner, approximately 90% of the diabetes cases he sees are type 2. Obesity is one of the primary risk factors for type 2 diabetes. Diabetes can contribute to heart attacks, strokes, blindness, and can necessitate amputations.

Type 1 diabetes is often diagnosed very quickly. People suffering from this form of diabetes will typically suffer from nausea, dehydration, and vomiting. The onset is often very abrupt. “It can be life threatening if it’s not treated promptly,” said Andrews. Type 2 diabetes, on the other hand, is something that can easily go undiagnosed. A patient can have it for years and not know about it until they receive a blood test. Symptoms here can include frequent urination and/or a tingling feeling in the feet.

## what to do

If you have type 1 diabetes, you will need to take insulin for the rest of your life. Meal planning and exercise will also help treat type 1 diabetes, but insulin is a must, either through injections or through an insulin pump. While people with type 2 diabetes may need insulin, this is not always the case. “Some type 2s can control it strictly through diet and exercise,” said Lisa Becnel, an RN at West Jefferson Medical Center.

Diet and exercise are crucial, because diabetes can lead to potentially fatal events such as heart attacks and strokes. According to Rose Wade, the program coordinator for the diabetes management center at East Jefferson General Hospital and, a lack of insulin causes sugar to stay in the blood, which makes the blood stickier. “Sugar sticks to things like cholesterol and triglycerides and can cause blockages,” said Wade.

At least 150 minutes of exercise a week is recommended for people with diabetes. “The more you exercise, the more you’re able to lower your blood sugar,” said Andrews.

Exercise is not just a must for people already diagnosed with diabetes, but it’s also vital for people at high risk for contracting diabetes (the disease can often be hereditary). “It’s like a medicine they’re taking to prevent diabetes...Yes, it’s that important,” said

Wade, who herself suffers from type 1 diabetes. A proper diet is also very important. Wade recommends that diabetes patients eat fried foods only occasionally, and stick to grilled, baked, or broiled meats. High fiber foods are a good idea and it’s also preferable to use brown rice instead of white rice and wheat bread instead of white bread.

Eating well and exercising frequently help to manage stress. This is critical because stress can also contribute to diabetic attacks. With stress or illness, the liver dumps extra sugar into the bloodstream. Becnel said that some of her patients who hadn’t had problems in a long time confessed to having diabetes-related problems during Hurricane Gustav when the evacuation and the stress it involved disrupted their normal healthy eating and exercise habits. Certain medications are also available to help diabetes patients.

Like any other disease, education is a must. The more you learn about it, the more you can empower yourself to fight the disease. “People need to be educated on how to take care of the disease,” said Becnel. “Even people who’ve had it for years could use a refresher course on the latest information.” If you’ve been diagnosed with diabetes or even if it’s just been a while since you’ve discussed your diabetes with a healthcare professional, contact a local hospital to see if they can put you in touch with a dietician and a diabetes educator.

## advice from a diabetes patient

Lesley Norwood, a New Orleans-based marketing writer, has had diabetes since she was two years old. At day care, the worker noticed she was going to the bathroom a lot. When Norwood visited the doctor, she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

Along the way, there have been a number of frightening moments. “Some of the scariest moments are low blood sugars...You feel totally out of control, helpless,” said Norwood. Insulin

injections could prove problematic as well. Now, Norwood is on an insulin pump, but growing up, she performed insulin injections.

“Injections make the insulin hit you all at once....So what would happen is I’d take my normal insulin injections and maybe I’d exercise more than normal that day...when all the insulin would hit me in the middle of the night, I’d have seizures.” The seizures happened frequently enough that Norwood had to sleep in the room closest to her parents so they could hear her kicking the wall when the seizures began. Thankfully, in the eight years since Norwood has been using the insulin pump, she has not suffered a seizure.

What kind of advice does Norwood give to people new to the disease? First, make time to eat throughout the day. “It’s easy to get lost in deadlines for work, going from place to place with friends, travelling,” said Norwood. Despite the distractions, it’s important to eat to maintain a healthy blood sugar level.

Maintaining a positive attitude and being patient is also important. “Don’t get so frustrated that you give up,” said Norwood. “Diabetes is difficult because no matter how hard you try, no matter how much time and effort you put into it, you’ll always have problems to improve upon. However, if you give up, you’ll face the realities of complications much sooner.”

## the bottom line

Sadly, there is still no cure for diabetes. “Believe me, every day I’m looking for that cure, but we haven’t found it yet,” said Wade. Even though there is no cure, things like exercise and diet can go a long way to controlling the symptoms. And it’s important for diabetes patients to view the event as a marathon, not a sprint. Healthy habits will need to be maintained for many years, not just the first one or two months after diagnosis.