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# **5 Things You Need to Know About Diabetes Pills**

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# 5 Things You Need to Know About Diabetes Pills

People with diabetes suffer from too much sugar (*glucose*) in their blood, a condition caused by problems in insulin production due to any of the following: the pancreas produce too little insulin, produce it too late, or the cells develop a resistance to insulin. Either way, the result is the same: a dangerous imbalance in blood sugar levels that could be fatal to the person affected.

The most common form of diabetes (*diabetes mellitus*) is Type 2 diabetes or non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM). It often affects people around the age of 40-50 with a family history of diabetes and overweight or leading a sedentary lifestyle. The disease can lead to several complications, including heart disease, kidney problems, blindness, and stroke.

Even as insight into diabetes mellitus grows deeper with countless research and double blind studies conducted, scientists have yet to find a cure for the disease, so the best chance that a patient has is on prevention and what treatment methods are available. For some, constant insulin injections are required in order to avoid any fatal consequences due to extremely unstable blood sugar levels. This could make living with diabetes a very difficult and trying time that does not help ease the patient's suffering.

But fortunately, Type 2 diabetes, the most common form of diabetes as mentioned, is easily treated with oral medications or diabetes pills, often without need of insulin shots. Combine that with proper diet and regular exercise and doctors agree that this is the best form of prevention for diabetes.

But what are diabetes pills? And what do you need to know about them?

Here's what:

## **1. When do you need them? When do you NOT need them?**

Diabetes pills are the first line of treatment that people diagnosed with diabetes have. However, these medications are only prescribed if you have Type 2 diabetes.

Type 1 almost always requires insulin while diabetes medications are generally discouraged in Type 3 patients, who are usually women during pregnancy.

The pills are often prescribed by doctors along with a healthy eating plan and a physical activity program. There is no single “best” treatment for Type 2 diabetes but a recent study by the American Diabetes Association shows that diabetes medications combined with diet and exercise can increase your chances of battling the pre-diabetes, a precursor of the full-fledged Type 2 diabetes.

Furthermore, a combination of more than one pill might prove to be an effective treatment as some of the drugs are specifically formulated to target one aspect of the disease while neglecting the rest.

However, it is best if you consult your doctor about treatment combinations rather than take your own initiative. Some drugs may react with the other pills or some other medication you are taking.

## **2. How do you know if it's working?**

Just as there is no one way to treat diabetes, there is also no way one way of testing whether your diabetes pills are doing. The closest your are going to get to testing the effectiveness of drugs is by constant monitoring of blood glucose.

You can do this either by self monitoring blood glucose (SMBG) or by urine testing, depending on what your doctor recommends.

For SMBG, you may be required to test at various times of the day (usually one to four times), using the following equipment:

- Lancet device
- Lancets
- Test strips
- Meter/sensor
- Alcohol wipes
- Log book

Some SMBG test kits include optional equipment composed of a computer and software that allows you to analyze results which are then stored for reference in the future.

### **3. What specific type of diabetes pills are you taking?**

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has divided diabetes pills into six categories, to wit (along with their generic names):

- Sulfonylureas – acetohexamide, chlorpropamide, glimepiride, glipizide, glyburide, tolazamide, tolbutamide
- Meglitinides - repaglinide
- Nateglinides
- Biguanides – combination drug (Glucovance), metformin HCl
- Thiazolidinediones – pioglitazone HCl, rosiglitazone maleate
- Alpha-glucose inhibitors

For a detailed comparison chart about all six categories, visit the Consumer Information page of the FDA website.

#### **4. How do these drugs work?**

Each of the six categories of diabetes pills work differently from the other, which is precisely why a combination therapy can be the best choice you have. But before you do anything drastic, know first what each of these drugs do and discuss with your doctor how best to approach treatment of the disease.

- ***Sulfonylureas***

A diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes means that your pancreas does not produce enough insulin. The function of sulfonylureas is to stimulate insulin production so that glucose may enter the cells and be utilized as energy for the body, resulting in lowered glucose levels in the blood.

Some potential side effects of this drug are: constipation, heartburn, low blood glucose (only if the dose of pills is too high), nausea, skin rash or itching, upset stomach, and weight gain. But not everyone who takes sulfonylureas will experience these side effects.

- ***Biguanides***

These drugs work by: decreasing production of glucose in the liver, decreasing absorption of glucose in the small intestine, and improving your ability to use insulin by improving insulin sensitivity of cells.

One of the many reasons why blood glucose levels in the body is abnormally high in the body of a diabetic is that the cells do not respond to the insulin produced by the pancreas. Therefore, even though your insulin production is normal, because of your cell's insensitivity to the hormone, it results to the same thing: high blood sugar levels.

By improving your body's response to insulin, biguanides can help lower sugar levels in the bloodstream.

Some potential side effects include: diarrhea, stomach upset, metallic taste in mouth, diminished appetite, weakness, tiredness, dizziness, and irregular heartbeat. If you experience any of these, consult your doctor immediately.

- ***Alpha-Glucosidase Inhibitors***

Alpha-glucosidase is the main digestive enzyme that breaks down starch into glucose. So when you eat or right after, your blood glucose levels are usually high because of the action of this particular enzyme.

The function of alpha-glucosidase inhibitors is to stop alpha-glucosidase from breaking down starch right away, allowing for a much slower breakdown of food and lower rise of sugar in your blood throughout the day.

Potential side effects of this drug include: abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, gas, and skin rash. Persons with a history of stomach or bowel problems are not advised to use this particular drug.

- ***Thiazolidinediones***

Thiazolidinediones works in two ways: increasing the sensitivity of insulin receptors found in cell membranes and decreasing the production of glucose in the liver. This results in better response to insulin, allowing the glucose to enter the cells for energy use, which would in turn lead to lowered glucose levels in the blood.

Taking thiazolidinediones may result in the following side effects: jaundice or the yellow discoloration of the skin and eyes, headache, anemia, loss of appetite, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, weight gain, stomach pain, edema (swelling of legs, ankles, and feet), cough, fatigue, and dark colored urine.

- ***Meglitinides***

Meglitinides is recommended taken after meals. The drug works quickly, allowing for flexibility, which makes it ideal also for people who do not follow a regular meal schedule.

The function of this drug is to increase the production of insulin in the pancreas. This will help glucose move from the bloodstream into the cells so that it may be used for energy production of the body.

The potential side effects of meglitinides include: body aches, constipation, weight gain, hypoglycemia (or low blood glucose, as a result of too high a dosage), and diarrhea. If you experience any of these effects while taking meglitinides, talk with your doctor.

## **5. What are package inserts?**

Package inserts or labels are documents that are often included in several types of diabetes pills. The FDA often includes them with the medications to serve as guides for healthcare providers. However, since these package inserts contain detailed information about the drug you are taking, including drug interactions, potential side effects, and general effects, you might also want to read them to familiarize yourself.

It is the manufacturer who makes the package inserts and FDA only approves it. The FDA website has copies of package inserts of several diabetes pills in downloadable PDF format.

Now, that you know the five salient facts about diabetes pills, you have a better foothold in the fight against this disease that medical practitioners call 'the silent killer.' Again, it is always best to speak with your doctor about your treatment

options before trying any combination therapy of two or three of these drugs. And if you are taking other prescription or over the counter drugs, inform your doctor to avoid any unpleasant drug interactions.

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