Cooperative Extension program aims to prevent Type 2 diabetes

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Arizonans at risk of developing Type 2 diabetes are learning how to make lifestyle changes that could prevent or delay that diagnosis thanks to the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Diabetes Prevention Program.

Around 1.8 million adults in Arizona are at high risk for Type 2 diabetes, which disproportionately affects certain races and ethnicities, such as those who are Hispanic/Latino, Native American or African American.

"One in 3 adults is estimated to have prediabetes, and most do not know it, which is why it's so important to raise awareness about this disease because it can be prevented," says Vanessa da Silva, state director of the Cooperative Extension Diabetes Prevention Program.

Unlike Type 1 diabetes, which usually is diagnosed in childhood or early adulthood and cannot be prevented, Type 2 diabetes usually occurs in people who are middle-aged or older, and can be prevented or delayed.

Every November, a spotlight is placed on all types of diabetes during National Diabetes Month. When it comes to preventing Type 2 diabetes, the effort is year-round.

The national Diabetes Prevention Program is an initiative that teaches those at risk about lifestyle changes like eating healthy, exercising and managing stress. A study affiliated with the program found that participants lowered their chances of developing Type 2 diabetes by 58%.

"Prediabetes doesn't always progress to Type 2 diabetes," da Silva said. "But when you have prediabetes, your high blood sugar is already doing damage to your cells and increases the risk of mortality, heart disease, and stroke."

The state DPP program is offered in English and Spanish and is free for adults 18 and older who live in Arizona at least part time and meet one or more of these eligibility requirements: being overweight, receiving a clinical diagnosis of prediabetes or having a high score in a diabetes risk survey. Those who don't meet those requirements or who currently have Type 2 diabetes can participate in the program by paying a $299 fee.

"We have coaches at brick-and-mortar extension offices in seven counties across Arizona – Apache, Graham, Maricopa, Pima, Pinal, Santa Cruz and Yavapai – so we can deliver the program locally, help people where they are," da Silva said.

The program is also offered over Zoom, making it available in every county in the state.

"This helps those with mobility or transportation issues or even a lack of time," she said. "The Zoom classes have been very successful, and we intend to keep going with both modes."

The sessions are run by trained lifestyle coaches who facilitate conversations about healthy changes in diet and lifestyle habits such as creating better sleep habits, fitting in physical activity or finding ways to reduce stress.

"We talk about all the things that help, and focus on what to work on each week, like eating non-starchy vegetables, adding in exercise and/or resistance training," da Silva said. "It's about making small changes you can consistently implement."

Many of the 400 DPP participants in Arizona have reported losing weight and/or lowering their A1C and cholesterol levels. Some have reported being able to stop taking certain medications. By measuring average blood sugar levels, A1C tests can identify prediabetes.

"There are more than 2 million people in Arizona who need the program," da Silva said. "But we've only scratched the surface."

Da Silva stresses the importance of getting screened at age 35 or younger, particularly if you have risk factors like obesity or a have a family history.

If you meet the eligibility requirements and are interested in starting the program, classes begin in January. Visit the DPP website for more specific information.

Additional Resources

- Annual Mini-Health Screenings
- Know Your Health Numbers Webinar Series
A version of this article first appeared on the Life & Work Connections website.

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