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Health and Human Services (HHS) Speeches

REMARKS BY: TOMMY G. THOMPSON, SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
PLACE: Press Conference on Diabetes, Washington, D.C.  
DATE: March 27, 2002 "Americans Warned of Risks of Pre-diabetes"

Welcome, everyone, to the Department of Health and Human Services, and thank you for coming.

We're here today to talk about an issue that is so very important to the health of this country - - diabetes. We have some important new information we're going to share about this debilitating disease.

With me today are:

Dr. Francine Kaufman, president-elect of the American Diabetes Association;

Dr. Frank Vinicor, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention;

Dr. Judith Fradkin, from the National Institutes of Health;

Dr. Steve Phurrough from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Thank you all for being here and for the wonderful work you are doing to raise awareness about diabetes.

Diabetes has reached epidemic proportions and it's still on the rise. In the last three decades alone, the number of people with diabetes has tripled. And today we have new numbers that show an estimated 17 million Americans now have diabetes. That's a very troubling number.

But what's equally troubling is that nearly an equal amount of people are on the verge of diabetes and will likely have this disease within 10 years if they don't do something now.

It's this group of people that we want to draw attention to today.

Through the expert work of the American Diabetes Association and this Department, we are presenting today a new classification for people who have high blood glucose levels that are higher than normal but they do not yet have diabetes.

It's called pre-diabetes.

Statistics show that approximately 16 million people between ages 40 and 74 are overweight and considered to have "pre-diabetes." This number is on top of the 17 million people who already have diabetes.

The reason pre-diabetes is so serious is because most people who have it will develop type 2 diabetes over the next decade. People with pre-diabetes also are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease, which is the number one killer of people with diabetes. What gives us hope and encouragement, however, is that people with pre-diabetes can take meaningful steps now to reduce their risks and avoid having diabetes.

First we need to reach those with pre-diabetes. Most people with pre-diabetes don't know it, because they have no symptoms.

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A working group of experts, including the ADA and our own National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, now recommends that doctors monitor their patients who are age 45 or older and are overweight, for pre-diabetes.

The recommendation also says that patients younger than 45 who are overweight and at high risk for developing diabetes should be monitored for pre-diabetes, too.

People with pre-diabetes need to be identified, and they need to know the seriousness of the condition.

More importantly, people need to know they CAN do something about it. Modest improvements in diet and exercise can prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes in persons who have pre-diabetes.

In fact, research from the National Institutes of Health shows that a more nutritious diet and moderate exercise reduces the risk of developing type 2 diabetes by 58 percent in people at high risk for developing diabetes.

We want people to understand that we're talking about significant benefits that can be derived from modest exercise.

You don't have to be working up a big sweat in the gym or become a long-distance runner to gain the benefits of exercise.

Just 30 minutes of walking a day, 5 days a week, can significantly reduce the risk of developing diabetes!

And, every year that a person can live free of diabetes means an added year free of the pain, disability and medical costs of this disease!

While today's pre-diabetes initiative focuses mainly on adults, we need to pay close attention to our children as well.

I'm especially concerned because obesity-related type 2 diabetes is on the rise in children - - especially African-American, Asian American and Hispanic children and adolescents. As parents and adults, we need to ensure our children get off to a healthy start. We need to be more cognizant of watching what our children are eating, and teaching them proper nutrition.

And, it's time that we get our kids off the playstations and onto the playgrounds for exercise. And we adults need to go out and play with them, too. The entire family will benefit from exercise and have fun while doing it.

So many of our health problems - whether it's diabetes, heart disease or types of cancer - - can be avoided through diet, exercise and just by taking better care of ourselves.

Just making these modest changes can make us healthier:

Eat your fruits and vegetables - - at least five a day

If you don't exercise, start!

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If you smoke, stop!

Only drink in moderation

And I want to start right here with this department. I'm issuing a challenge to our employees to eat right and exercise.

I'm asking our employees to voluntarily weigh themselves the day after Easter. And, I'm encouraging anyone who is overweight to lose 10 pounds. I plan to lose 15 pounds myself.

So let's get started. And if you're possibly pre-diabetes or at risk of diabetes, now is the time you must get started.

You may have noticed a sheet of paper on your chairs. It's called the Diabetes Risk Assessment Quiz.

It's a simple quiz with six questions that can help you assess your risk for developing diabetes.

Please - - take a few minutes to take this simple test. Ask your loved ones to take it. If you find that you're at increased risk, talk to your doctor.

Diabetes is a battle we can win! It doesn't have to be devastating. It can be prevented and, if it occurs, managed successfully.