

Diabetes and Heart Health: Listen, Act, Prevent

by Tim Ditman
February 15 2024 9:00 AM



It's a good idea to keep an eye on your heart's health. Everyone. All the time.

But [Ash Al-Dadah, MD](#), an interventional cardiologist at OSF HealthCare, estimates that more than half of the patients with advanced heart disease who come through his door also have diabetes, which puts them at greater risk for heart disease and related issues.

His bottom-line advice: listen to your body.

Risks, symptoms

Dr. Al-Dadah says people with diabetes are at a higher risk for blocked arteries, which can lead to heart attack and stroke. Blood circulation can even be impaired down into your legs. This can impair wound healing, leading to ulcers. It can also cause pain while walking.

Dr. Al-Dadah says a hallmark symptom in people with diabetes is shortness of breath when doing any activity that requires effort. Chest pain is also seen.

“There’s a decline in the functional capacity,” Dr. Al-Dadah explains. “You’re doing less than what you did a few months ago because symptoms are limiting you. Rest tends to be the only alleviating factor.”

If you have these issues (shortness of breath and a decline in function), see a health care provider to talk about screening for heart disease. For vascular disease in your legs and feet, consult a provider if you see open sores and wounds or if you feel burning in your calves when you move.

“Skin is the largest organ in the body. It acts like a wall to defend the body that is sterile from germs that could lead to gangrene,” Dr. Al-Dadah says, noting the importance of taking care of wounds.

Symptoms related to the carotid artery and stroke, like loss of vision in one eye, are a “red flag,” Dr. Al-Dadah says. Seek medical help immediately.

Prevention

Some ways for people with diabetes to stay on top of heart health:

- Monitor your glucose levels as advised by your provider. Dr. Al-Dadah says many people give themselves a finger prick to draw blood, and a small device gives a reading. Newer devices continuously monitor glucose levels, and it’s attached to a smartphone application that can alert you in real time.
- Be active. If walking or running isn’t in the cards, try an elliptical, stationary bike or aqua therapy.

“Spending 20 minutes doing some of these activities four to five times a week is very heart healthy,” Dr. Al-Dadah says. “It tends to reduce the risk of heart disease and control glucose levels.”

- Monitor what you eat. A big one: cut out high carbohydrate foods that tend to lead to excessive glucose levels. Examples include white bread, white rice and foods with corn syrup.

“It’s a tough task,” Dr. Al-Dadah admits. “But with repetition and practice comes perfection. If you keep doing it daily, you’ll be able to master your diet in order to reduce your glucose levels and get control over your diabetes. It also leads to weight loss, which is the most helpful thing reduce the risk of diabetes complications.”