

# Don't take diabetic foot lightly

DIABETES patients, because of their high blood sugar levels, are at risk of getting diabetic foot. This condition worsens over time as a diabetic person's nerves or blood vessels get progressively more damaged. The nerve damage can lead to loss of feeling in your feet, which can then lead to ulceration and infections. In serious cases, doctors might need to amputate.

Dr Tan Kia Lean, consultant vascular surgeon at Ara Damansara Medical Centre, shares that the latest figures revealed earlier this year told a grim story. About 2.5 million adult Malaysians have diabetes. Of this number, 15% suffer from diabetic foot.

"The only way to prevent diabetic foot is to manage your diabetes well," he says.

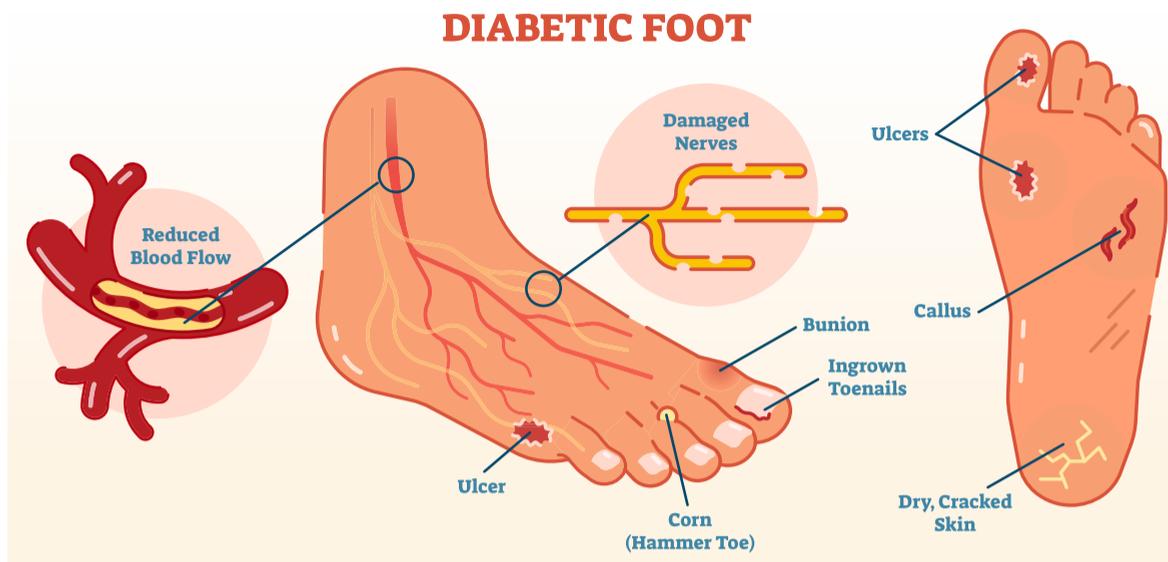
Many Malaysians live very unhealthy lifestyles. With poor food choices, high consumption of sugar coupled with a lack of exercise, it is no wonder Malaysia has the highest number of diabetic people in Asia.

Dr Tan reminds people to not underestimate the importance of a good diet. "It's not just about the number on the glucometer. That's not the only thing doctors look at. What we look at is the sugar level in the body as a whole."

High sugar levels in the body can lead to other health issues, including kidney failure, blindness, heart problems, angiopathy and neuropathy.

## Be on the look out

Dr Tan advises people with



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diabetes to be extra careful and always be on the lookout for signs of diabetic foot. Diabetic patients need to get their feet checked at least once a year by their clinician or a physician. However, on your own, there are symptoms you should look out for:

- General loss of feeling
- Numbness or tingling sensation
- Blisters or other wounds without pain
- Skin discoloration and temperature changes
- Red streaks
- Wounds with or without drainage
- A painful tingling

Dr Tan also urges diabetics to take everything seriously, even ulcers. "If you get a small ulcer, bacteria and germs attracted to the high glucose levels of your blood will infect it, and between 40% and 80% of the time, your wound will get infected. If you are diabetic, chances your wound will get infected is very high and the risk is as high as 40-80%."

"Some infections, such as peripheral arterial, microangiopathy and neuropathy, can cause serious damage to your foot (peripheral microangiopathy, neuropathy and infection can cause serious damage to your foot)."

"If you have diabetes and

experience the symptoms of an infection, you need to seek help immediately. If it goes untreated, at times, it can be fatal."

## Prevention is key

Progression of the disease occurs at a pace that is set by the diabetic patient.

"If you have good control of your diabetes, then the progression of the disease will be slow. However, if you have poor or no control over your diabetes, the disease can progress very fast," says Dr Tan, who shares that he has witnessed patients who have lost not only the foot but their whole leg in the span



Dr Tan Kia Lean.

of mere days.

He also warns against the misconception that traditional treatment is better for diabetic patients. "If you do want to go through with it, please consult your physician first and not treat yourself with off-the-shelf medication, because sometimes these medications do cause more harm than good."

With diabetic foot, the aim is to prevent an amputation. Lower-limb revascularisation is a treatment that, during the early stages of the disease, can help a patient. Dr Tan shares that the treatment has a success rate of between 80% and 85%.

"What we want to do is improve the blood supply to the foot, the condition of the patient and avoid amputation," says Dr Tan.

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.

# Not the end of the world

MANY people believe diabetes only affects adults, but children develop both type 1 and type 2 diabetes, too.

Dr Wu Loo Ling, consultant paediatrician and paediatric endocrinologist at Subang Jaya Medical Centre refutes this misconception, saying, "The prevalence of type 2 diabetes in children is increasing, and the main culprit is unhealthy lifestyle choices. You now see children eating more unhealthy food, not getting enough exercise and putting on excessive amount of weight, making themselves susceptible to develop the disease."

On the other hand, the cause of type 1 diabetes is multifactorial. The interplay of genetic and environmental factors triggers auto-antibodies production causing progressive destruction of insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. However, as Dr Wu points out, it does not mean that a child with a genetic predisposition of diabetes will definitely develop the disease, various factors are needed to trigger its development.

"Environmental factors such as an infection can cause the body to produce auto-antibodies against the pancreas, resulting in it becoming smaller and ultimately producing very little or no insulin at all," she explains.

While type 1 diabetes is common in younger children, type 2 is increasingly diagnosed in adolescents and teenagers. According to Dr Wu, symptoms of type 1 diabetes is often acute and dramatic at onset compared to type 2, making it more easily detectable than the latter.

Diagnosis is done through



Dr Wu Loo Ling.

symptom analysis, blood and urine examinations and oral glucose tolerance tests.

## Can the child have a normal life?

Treatment for type 1 diabetes is by external insulin administration via injections, while type 2 diabetes requires proper lifestyle modifications, weight loss and oral medications.

"Children with diabetes can certainly lead as normal a life as any other child, provided the diabetes is controlled and managed well. It is crucial for them to lead a healthy lifestyle with well-planned diets, regular exercise and carrying on with treatment as prescribed by their healthcare professionals," says Dr Wu.

She emphasises that family support is of utmost importance when it comes to managing diabetes in children, saying, "Parents must work together with their children to adopt a healthy lifestyle and eating habits as



Healthy eating habits must start at home and include the whole family.

suggested by healthcare professionals. It should involve the whole family and not just the affected child.

One issue faced by parents of children with diabetes is hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose). Because children are naturally active, many parents may fear that too much activity might cause their children's blood glucose level to dip dangerously low, causing parents to either overfeed their children or stop them from being active.

Both situations are not ideal, so Dr Wu suggests that parents need to check their children's blood glucose levels more frequently in these situations and act accordingly as what they had been taught to prevent dangerously high or low levels. Frequent blood glucose checking

gives a bigger picture on the trending of glucose throughout the day and night. Preventative or remedial measures can be taken promptly to ensure that the glucose levels are within optimal limits. Hence children with diabetes can exercise safely and do everything like their peers while keeping their blood glucose under control.

Continuous blood glucose monitoring systems are available nowadays to keep track of your blood glucose levels continuously. "There are blood glucose monitoring patches available that can help track the blood glucose levels 24/7. This is particularly good for children who are scared of needles and refused frequent finger-pricking," she opines.

There are different types and dosages of insulin as well as oral medication, it is imperative that

parents listen to their healthcare professionals when it comes to treating their children.

Dr Wu insists that diabetes does not stop children from enjoying their childhood, but shares that in most instances, the level of enjoyment a child experiences comes from the personal care and involvement of their parents in their daily living and diabetes management.

She says, "Yes, it can be an overwhelming thing for parents when their child is diagnosed with diabetes, but there are many support groups here in Malaysia and it is advisable that parents join such groups, talk to other parents and do what is best for their children."

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.