WHY DIABETES RISK BEGINS BEFORE THE SCALES SHOW IT

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He adds that some people with normal body weight may still have excessive visceral fat surrounding their internal organs. "Being slim does not necessarily mean being metabolically healthy."

WHAT GENETIC RESEARCH REVEALS

The 2025 Nature Medicine study adds to growing evidence that genetic factors influence diabetes susceptibility among South Asians. Its findings point to pathways involving pancreatic beta-cell function, which affects insulin production, and the distribution of body fat.

A 2022 study published in Communications Biology also identified 21 previously unreported genetic loci associated with type 2 diabetes through a genome-wide analysis involving 16,677 South Asian participants with the condition and 33,856 controls.

However, genetic susceptibility does not mean that developing diabetes is inevitable. Environmental conditions, diet, physical activity and other factors remain important.

Prof Saifuddin says family history and waist circumference should be considered alongside body weight when assessing risk.

"Diabetes risk should therefore not be assessed solely through appearance or body weight. Waist circumference, blood glucose, blood pressure and family history should also be considered," he says.

WHY EARLY SCREENING MATTERS

Researchers have also examined whether nutrition during pregnancy and early childhood can affect metabolic health later in life.

A 2016 study published in BMJ Open investigated young adults in Matlab, Bangladesh, who had been exposed to the 1974 famine at different stages of early life. Although researchers found differences in body weight and some epigenetic markers, there were no statistically significant overall differences in mean blood glucose or diabetes rates. The study therefore did not establish that famine exposure caused diabetes.

For people who may be at risk, screening can help identify problems before symptoms appear. Prof Siddiqui recommends blood sugar testing for people above 30, particularly those with hypertension, excess weight, high cholesterol, a smoking habit or a family history of diabetes.

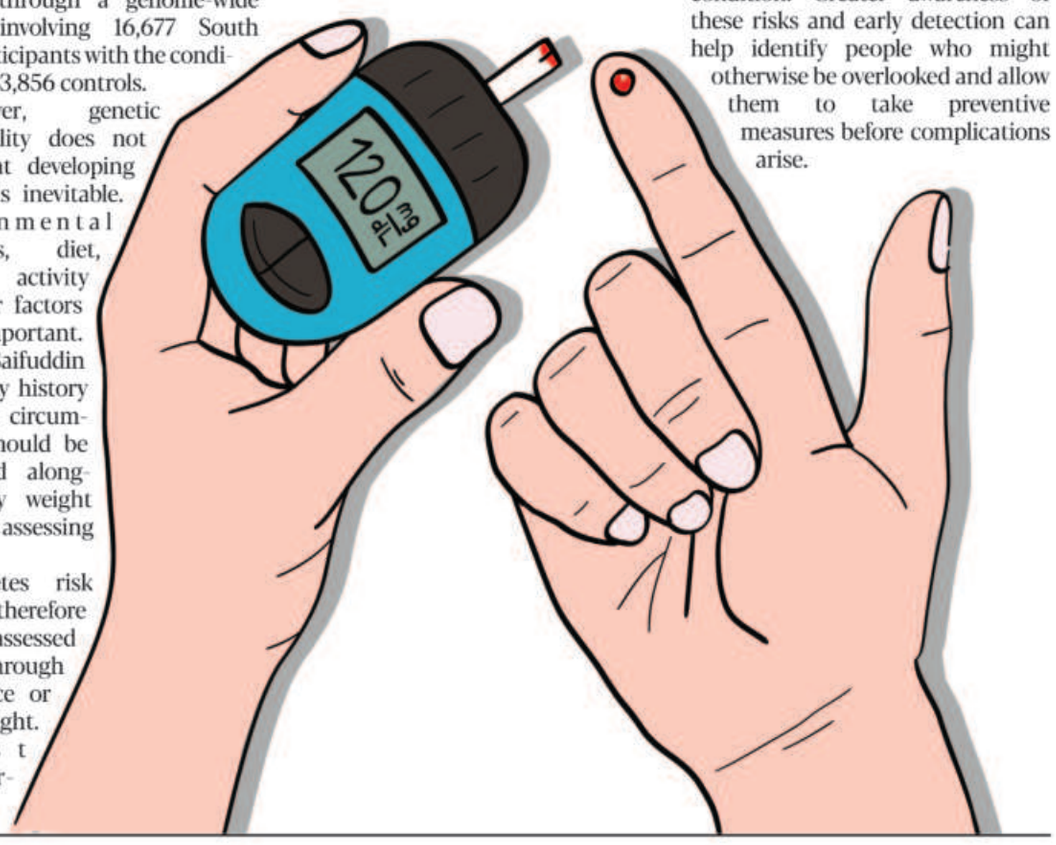
He also highlights the importance of lifestyle changes for people with prediabetes.

"Research has shown that reducing carbohydrate intake, walking for at least 150 minutes a week and losing around seven kilogrammes of weight can the risk of reducedeveloping diabetes by 60%," he says.

Diabetes can be diagnosed through tests such as fasting plasma glucose, HbA1c and the oral glucose tolerance test. Diagnostic thresholds include fasting plasma glucose of 7.0 mmol/L or higher, HbA1c of 6.5% or higher, or a two-hour glucose level of 11.1 mmol/L or higher during an oral glucose tolerance test. In people without clear symptoms, an abnormal result generally needs confirmation.

Family history, waist circumference and other risk factors need to be considered when assessing diabetes risk, particularly among South Asians who may develop the condition at lower body weights. BMI and physical appearance alone may not provide a complete picture, making regular screening and timely testing important.

Although genetic factors can increase a person's susceptibility to diabetes, they do not determine whether someone will develop the condition. Greater awareness of these risks and early detection can help identify people who might otherwise be overlooked and allow them to take preventive measures before complications arise.



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