Early action holds the key to diabetes control

As we no longer look at diabetes simply as a blood sugar disorder, the treatment has advanced tremendously. There are newer generations of medicines, including sodium-glucose co-transporter-2 (SGLT2) inhibitors. Another major advancement in diabetes management has been the introduction of GLP-1 receptor agonists.

Professor Dr. F. M. Siddiqui
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Bangladesh has an estimated 13–14 million diagnosed diabetes patients, while the number of undiagnosed cases could be three times higher, says Professor Dr. F. M. Siddiqui, Vice-Chancellor of Bangladesh Medical University (BMU). He warns that diabetes often develops without symptoms, making early screening and preventive lifestyle changes essential. In an interview with The Daily Star on the occasion of World Diabetes Day 2026, themed "Early Action on Diabetes", he discusses the country's growing diabetes burden, the risks of obesity, advances in treatment and the need to strengthen preventive healthcare.

The Daily Star (TDS): This year's World Diabetes Day theme is "Early Action on Diabetes". What should this mean in practice for Bangladesh, considering the country's growing burden of diabetes?

Professor Dr. F. M. Siddiqui (FMS): The phrase "Early Action on Diabetes" carries crucial guidance. It is particularly important for Bangladesh because diabetes is a silent killer. Initially, the disease presents no symptoms and can develop inside the body for many years without the patient being aware of it. In most cases, it is diagnosed only when someone undergoes medical tests due to another complication.

The primary goal of diabetes treatment is to prevent or reverse complications. For that, early detection, particularly even before particular symptoms appear, is the most crucial factor. If we identify the disease early, we can initiate several interventions, and medication may not even be necessary in some cases. Before medication, we have to have a lifestyle modification.

According to available data, approximately 13 to 14 million people in Bangladesh have been diagnosed with diabetes. However, in my estimation, there are at least three times as many people who remain undiagnosed. They simply do not know that they have the disease.

For instance, if someone is overweight, smokes or leads a sedentary lifestyle, changing their dietary habits, reducing refined carbohydrates, walking regularly and losing some weight can have a significant impact. These changes can benefit individuals over a long period.

That is why early detection is vital. There is simply no alternative to it when it comes to reducing complications.

TDS: What prevents people in Bangladesh from receiving an early diagnosis? Who should seek screening even if they have no symptoms?

FMS: One of the main reasons for delayed diabetes diagnosis is a lack of personal awareness. Building awareness requires a concerted effort through various communication channels, including social media, electronic media and print media. These are platforms that people engage with every day and can play an important role in bringing health information to public attention.

At the same time, awareness must be strengthened through primary healthcare facilities, hospitals and other existing healthcare structures. The health sector can take initiatives such as distributing leaflets, displaying health information and running public awareness campaigns to encourage people to undergo regular blood sugar tests.

People should be made aware that they do not necessarily need to experience symptoms to get tested. For instance, individuals aged 30 or above, those with hypertension, excess body weight, high cholesterol or a history of smoking, as well as those with a family history of diabetes, should be encouraged to check their blood sugar levels even if they feel perfectly healthy.

The message should be clear: if you fall into any of these risk categories, do not wait for symptoms to appear. Get your blood sugar checked or consult a healthcare professional at your nearest healthcare facility. Early awareness and timely screening can help identify diabetes before complications develop.

- Bangladesh's undiagnosed diabetes burden could be at least three times higher than its estimated 13–14 million diagnosed cases.
- Diabetes screening should not wait for symptoms. People aged 30 and above and those with risk factors need regular blood sugar checks.
- Normal body weight does not necessarily mean low diabetes risk. Abdominal fat can trigger insulin resistance and increase the risk of type 2 diabetes.
- Early detection of prediabetes creates an opportunity to delay or even prevent type 2 diabetes through dietary changes, physical activity and weight management.
- Modern diabetes treatment is moving beyond blood sugar control, with newer medicines offering additional heart and kidney protection and helping manage body weight.

TDS: Diabetes can affect several vital organs, including the heart, kidneys, eyes and nerves. How does this damage develop, and why is early diagnosis essential?

FMS: Diabetes affects several target organs. The first is the nervous system. Once the damage reaches an advanced stage, it may become irreversible. Another major target is the eyes. Diabetes can affect the retina, a condition known as diabetic retinopathy. The heart is another major concern. Diabetes increases the risk of ischaemic heart disease and serious cardiovascular events, including heart attacks. Also, diabetes is one of the leading causes of kidney failure globally.

By the time these organs become significantly damaged, the disease may have progressed considerably. People must understand that they need to get diagnosed before their organs are affected.

TDS: How does obesity increase the risk of type 2 diabetes? Why should people who are not visibly overweight also pay attention to their risk?

FMS: There is a direct link between Type 2 diabetes and obesity.

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