# Why early detection matters

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***In an interview with The Daily Star (TDS), Dr. Faria Afsana, Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Endocrinology at BIRDEM, Dhaka and President of the Bangladesh Endocrine Society (BES), discusses the importance of early diabetes detection, timely diagnosis and intervention in preventing long-term complications.***

**The Daily Star (TDS): Why does diabetes frequently go undiagnosed in its early stages, and what makes early detection particularly important?**

**Dr. Faria Afsana:** Type 2 diabetes often develops silently, without noticeable symptoms. Many people remain unaware of elevated blood glucose until complications appear. Early detection is essential because prolonged high blood glucose can gradually damage vital organs. Timely diagnosis allows lifestyle modifications and appropriate treatment, helping prevent or delay complications such as heart disease, kidney disease, vision loss and nerve damage. Early intervention improves long-term health and quality of life.

**TDS: At what age should people in Bangladesh start routine diabetes screening? Considering the rising prevalence of type 2 diabetes among younger adults, should screening guidelines be revised to include younger age groups?**

**FA:** Routine diabetes screening is generally recommended from age 35, while individuals with additional risk factors should be screened earlier. South Asians, including Bangladeshis, often develop diabetes at younger ages and lower body weights. Therefore, screening strategies should consider population-specific risks. Young adults with obesity, family history of diabetes, hypertension or other metabolic abnormalities should undergo screening regardless of age. Risk-based screening can identify diabetes and prediabetes before complications develop.

**TDS: Who should be considered at high risk of developing diabetes? How significant are factors such as family history, obesity, sedentary lifestyles, gestational diabetes and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) in determining an individual's risk?**

**FA:** Major risk factors include family history of diabetes, abdominal obesity, physical inactivity, hypertension and abnormal cholesterol. Women with previous gestational diabetes or polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) also face increased risk due to underlying insulin resistance. Genetic susceptibility and increasing age further contribute. Individuals with multiple risk factors are particularly vulnerable and should undergo regular screening, even without symptoms. Healthy eating, regular physical activity and weight management can significantly reduce their risk.

**TDS: Which tests are most reliable for detecting diabetes at an early stage, and when should each be recommended?**

**FA:** Three standard laboratory tests are used: fasting plasma glucose, HbA1c and oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT). Fasting glucose is affordable and widely available, while HbA1c reflects average blood glucose over approximately three months without requiring fasting. OGTT can detect glucose abnormalities missed by other tests and is particularly useful during pregnancy and in selected high-risk individuals. Test selection depends on clinical circumstances, and abnormal results generally require confirmation in people without symptoms.

**TDS: How long can someone live with undiagnosed diabetes before developing complications? Can damage to the kidneys, eyes, heart and nerves begin even when a person has no obvious symptoms?**

**FA:** Type 2 diabetes can remain undiagnosed for several years. During this period, elevated blood glucose may silently damage blood vessels and nerves. Kidney disease, retinal damage and neuropathy can develop before noticeable symptoms appear. Some individuals already have complications at diagnosis. Cardiovascular risk may also increase during prediabetes, particularly alongside obesity or hypertension. Therefore, regular screening is essential, even when someone feels completely healthy.

**TDS: There is growing concern about diabetes among younger people in Bangladesh. What lifestyle, dietary and environmental factors are contributing to this trend, and what role should schools, workplaces and primary healthcare facilities play in early identification?**

**FA:** Rapid urbanisation, unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles are increasing diabetes risk among younger Bangladeshis. Sugary beverages, fast food, refined carbohydrates, prolonged screen time, physical inactivity and inadequate sleep contribute significantly. Schools should promote balanced nutrition and exercise, while workplaces should encourage healthy lifestyles and risk-based screening. Primary healthcare facilities can identify vulnerable individuals through BMI, waist circumference, family history and appropriate blood glucose assessment.

**TDS: Many people rely on home glucose meters or occasional blood sugar tests at pharmacies to assess their diabetes risk. How reliable are these methods for early detection, and when is laboratory-based confirmation necessary?**

**FA:** Home glucose meters and pharmacy-based tests help identify possible blood glucose abnormalities but cannot independently confirm diabetes. Results may vary due to device accuracy, testing technique and meal timing. A single normal reading also does not exclude diabetes. Individuals with abnormal readings or significant risk factors should undergo laboratory testing using fasting plasma glucose, HbA1c or OGTT. Laboratory confirmation ensures accurate diagnosis and appropriate management.

**TDS: What measures should Bangladesh prioritise to make diabetes screening more accessible and affordable? How can primary healthcare centres, community clinics and public awareness programmes contribute to identifying people at risk before complications begin?**

**FA:** Bangladesh should integrate affordable, risk-based diabetes screening into routine primary healthcare. Community clinics can identify high-risk individuals, provide initial screening and arrange laboratory confirmation. Public awareness campaigns should highlight that diabetes may develop without symptoms. Workplace screening, community programmes and trained healthcare workers can improve access, particularly in underserved areas. Affordable testing, effective referrals, counselling and regular follow-up are essential to reduce delayed diagnosis, prevent complications and minimise the long-term healthcare burden.

- South Asians, including Bangladeshis are more likely to develop diabetes at younger ages and lower body weights.
- Diabetes can remain undiagnosed for years silently damaging the kidneys, eyes, heart and nerves even without noticeable symptoms.
- Affordable, risk-based screening through primary healthcare facilities and community clinics is essential to identifying diabetes before complications develop.