Preventing Type 2 Diabetes: **Act Early, Reduce Your Risk**

Many people remain unaware of their diabetic condition. Regular checks of blood sugar, weight, waist size and blood pressure can help identify those at risk before diabetes develops.

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Type 2 diabetes is increasingly becoming a public health concern in Bangladesh, affecting people at younger ages and putting millions at risk of long-term complications. Early screening, healthier dietary choices, regular physical activity and timely lifestyle changes can significantly reduce the risk of developing it. In an interview with The Daily Star, Dr. Shahjada Selim, Associate Professor of Endocrinology at Bangladesh Medical University (BMU) and President-elect of the Bangladesh Endocrine Society (BES), discusses the major risk factors behind type 2 diabetes, the importance of identifying prediabetes, and steps individuals can take to prevent or delay its onset.

The Daily Star (TDS): What are the major risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes, and how much of the disease can be prevented through early intervention?

Dr. Shahjada Selim (SS): The major risk factors for type 2 diabetes include excess body weight, especially fat around the waist, lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating habits, family history, increasing age, high blood pressure and abnormal cholesterol levels. Women who had diabetes during pregnancy or have polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) are also at higher risk. Although we cannot change our age or family history, many other risk factors can be controlled. A major study called the Diabetes Prevention Program showed that people at high risk could reduce their chances of developing diabetes by 58% through modest weight loss and regular exercise.

TDS: Who is most at risk of developing type 2 diabetes in Bangladesh, and at what age should people begin routine screening?

SS: Bangladeshis, like other South Asians, tend to develop type 2 diabetes at a younger age and at a lower body weight than many other populations. People with a family history of diabetes, excess belly fat, high blood pressure, or a physically inactive lifestyle are particularly vulnerable. A body mass index (BMI) of 23 or above also indicates increased risk in our population. Adults should generally begin diabetes screening at age 35, or earlier if they are overweight or have other risk factors. If the results are normal, testing should be repeated at least every three years. People with prediabetes should check their blood glucose at least once a year.

TDS: What are the early warning signs of prediabetes, and how can people identify their risk before developing full-blown diabetes?

SS: Prediabetes means blood sugar is higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes. It usually causes no noticeable symptoms. Some people may develop dark, thickened skin around the neck or armpits, or gain excess weight around the waist. However, these signs alone cannot confirm prediabetes. A blood test is necessary. An HbA1c level of 5.7% to 6.4%, or fasting blood glucose of 5.6 to 6.9 mmol/L, may indicate prediabetes. Many people remain unaware of their condition. Regular checks of blood sugar, weight, waist size and blood pressure can help identify those at risk before diabetes develops.

- Type 2 diabetes risk can be reduced by 58% through early lifestyle changes.
- South Asians face higher diabetes risk at younger ages and lower body weights.
- Prediabetes often has no symptoms, making regular blood glucose screening essential.
- Losing 5–7% of body weight can significantly reduce the risk of diabetes.

TDS: How do every day dietary habits including high carbohydrate intake, sugary drinks and processed foods, contribute to the growing risk of type 2 diabetes?

SS: Large portions of white rice and other refined carbohydrates foods are digested quickly, causing blood sugar levels to rise rapidly. Over time, excessive calorie intake and weight gain can make the body less responsive to insulin, increasing diabetes risk. Sugary tea, soft drinks and packaged juices add extra sugar and calories without making us feel full. Fried and processed foods also contribute to weight gain because they often contain unhealthy fats and excess calories.

TDS: What role do physical inactivity, poor sleep and stress play in increasing diabetes risk, particularly among urban populations?

SS: Lack of physical activity, poor sleep and ongoing stress significantly increase diabetes risk. However, long office hours, traffic congestion and excessive screen time have made many city residents less active. Poor sleep can disturb hormones that control hunger and blood sugar, while sleeping less than six hours regularly is linked to increased diabetes risk. These factors often occur together in urban life, making city residents particularly vulnerable to type 2 diabetes.

TDS: For someone diagnosed with prediabetes, what practical lifestyle changes should they make to prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes?

SS: Losing just 5–7% of body weight can significantly reduce the risk. For someone weighing 70 kg, this means losing around 4–5 kg. Aim for at least 30 minutes of brisk walking five days a week and avoid sitting for long periods. Reduce rice portions and fill half the plate with vegetables along with fish, eggs, pulses, or lean meat. Choose whole grains when possible and replace sugary drinks with water. Avoid smoking, get seven to eight hours of sleep.

TDS: How effective are preventive interventions such as regular screening, dietary counselling and structured lifestyle programs, and what should Bangladesh do to make them more accessible?

SS: Regular screening helps identify people at risk, while dietary counselling and structured exercise programs can prevent or delay diabetes for many years. In Bangladesh, these services should be more accessible through community clinics, upazila health complexes, workplaces and educational institutions. We need more trained dietitians, health educators, affordable testing and easy-to-understand health information in Bangla.