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PHYSICAL THERAPISTS CITE SAFE AND APPROPRIATE EXERCISE AS KEY IN HELPING TO PREVENT TYPE 2 DIABETES

*Ninety Percent of Diabetes Cases Due to Excess Weight,
Lack of Exercise, and Poor Diet*

Following an appropriate exercise program and doing it safely can be key in preventing type 2 diabetes for Americans at high risk for the disease, says the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). According to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health, more than 18 million Americans have diabetes; about 5 million don't know they have the disease. If the spread of diabetes continues at its present rate, the number of people affected in the United States will increase from about 14 million in 1995 to 22 million in 2025.

Risk factors for diabetes include a family history of the disease, being overweight, a prior history of gestational diabetes (high blood sugar during pregnancy), physical inactivity, and race/ethnicity. African Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, American Indians, and some Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are at particularly high risk for type 2 diabetes. In the study of diabetes prevention, all ethnic groups experienced an equal benefit from lifestyle intervention.

The good news, says Harvard, is that type 2 diabetes is largely preventable. About 9 cases in 10 could be avoided by taking several simple steps: keeping weight under control, exercising more, eating a healthy diet, and not smoking.

APTA member Terry Michel, PT, DPT, DSc, CCS, who contributed to a 2001 National Institutes of Health (NIH) study about the role lifestyle interventions play in preventing diabetes, said that physical therapists can play a vital role in helping people develop safe exercise programs. "The best guarantee for preventing diabetes onset is to remain physically fit and maintain an ideal body weight. Overweight or obese individuals must follow an appropriate exercise program that includes aerobic conditioning and avoidance of exercises that can lead to injury," said Michel.

Michel says that physical therapists can design a low-impact form of weight training by using low-weight, high-repetition exercise bands. This type of exercise helps to avoid excessive joint stress. "Modified yoga stretches and Tai Chi are also good exercises for promoting flexibility and relaxation. Subjects enjoyed doing these exercises in groups," she said.

As people who are overweight begin to lose weight and gain fitness, they also need to increase the intensity of their exercise, according to Michel. "Physical therapists are especially good at balancing the progression of the exercise prescription with the need for joint protection and safety during exercise," she said. This approach helps people to continue to pursue and enjoy their exercise programs and become lifelong exercisers, supporting the maintenance of a healthy body weight.

"Overweight or obese individuals are at high risk for physical injury from an improper exercise regime," said Michael Mueller, PT, PhD, associate professor at Washington University School of Medicine and an APTA member. "Range of motion, mobility, and flexibility may be reduced in people who are overweight or obese, thereby increasing their chances for serious injury." He added, "As with all exercise programs designed to prevent illness, it's important that at-risk individuals work with professionals who can help design a safe and thorough regimen that meets individual needs and circumstances."

It is also important to recognize that overweight or obese individuals may have experienced past failures with exercise. "The guidance of a physical therapist who understands the difficulties that individuals may be encountering, monitors their progress closely, and provides specific, appropriate exercise guidelines often can spell the difference between success and failure," Mueller explained.

If you or someone you know is at risk for developing type 2 diabetes, consult your physical therapist for a safe, appropriate exercise plan to help reduce that risk.

**The American Physical Therapy Association (www.apta.org) is a national professional organization representing more than 70,000 members. Its goal is to foster advancements in physical therapy education, practice and research.
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