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Too Few Understand Diabetes' Dangers

(HealthDay) While millions of Americans are at risk for developing diabetes, too few perceive the threat it can pose to their health, according to a new survey.



In fact, most respondents feared shark bites, plane crashes or cancer more, even though they are more likely to get diabetes, according to the pollsters.

"We undertook the survey because we are trying to better understand why people aren't taking diabetes as seriously as we need people to take this disease," said Ann Albright, director of the division of diabetes translation for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and a spokeswoman for the American Diabetes Association (ADA), which sponsored the survey.

While 49 percent of the more than 2,400 U.S. adults polled said they most feared cancer as a potential health problem, just 3 percent said they worried about diabetes. In fact, each disease has about the same number of expected new cases each year, more than a million annually.

Overall, one in 10 U.S. adults, or 10 percent, have been diagnosed with diabetes at some point in their lives, compared to 6 percent who have experienced cancer, the ADA says.

"Our point is *not* that people shouldn't be concerned about cancer," Albright said. "We are trying to help people put things in a more accurate perspective."

After cancer, respondents next feared heart disease, mentioned by 12 percent, and nervous system disorders, noted by 11 percent.

The online poll was conducted by Harris Interactive in August 2008.

Other answers in the survey also suggest that people's fears are not realistic. When asked to pick from a potential list of accidents, plane crashes topped the list, noted by 16 percent of respondents. That was followed by lighting strikes, feared by 5 percent, vehicle accidents, 3 percent, and fire, 2 percent.

Asked to note their concerns with animal or insect contact, 13 percent noted snake bites and 8 percent spider bites. Four percent mentioned shark attacks.

About 70 confirmed shark attacks occur globally each year, experts estimate, and in 2007, 491 people died in plane crashes.

In contrast, 233,619 Americans died in 2005 from causes related to diabetes, the ADA noted.

The survey results suggest people need to assess their diabetes risk and take it more seriously, Albright said. Keeping to a healthy weight, or shedding excess pounds, is one big step to reducing the odds for diabetes. In fact, losing just 5 percent or 10 percent of body weight can help, she said.

The results suggest that people need to increase their awareness of diabetes risk, added Dr. David M. Nathan, director of the Diabetes Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, and a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. He reviewed the poll results but was not involved in the survey.

People "should be more concerned about getting it," Nathan said. The good news is they can sometimes prevent it with lifestyle change and, if they are diagnosed, keep diabetes under control.

Amparo Gonzalez, president of the American Association of Diabetes Educators, agreed.

"The finding that only 3 percent of people surveyed feared being diagnosed with diabetes is surprising," Gonzalez said. Like Nathan, she emphasized that the disease is often preventable if lifestyle changes are made in time.