

## | HEALTH &amp; WELL-BEING

# DIABETES EDUCATION

Lifetime learning for a lifelong disease

#### About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.



MERRILY LUNSFORD/CAPE COD TIMES

Debra Gibbons is a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator at Learning for Life, Cape Cod Healthcare's diabetes education program. She uses a basket of various foods to counsel clients on portion control. People at all stages of the disease are encouraged to get a referral to the program.

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

"Diabetes is a lifetime thing," says Deb Gibbons, registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator at Learning for Life, Cape Cod Healthcare's diabetes education program. "What we're about is helping people figure out what they need to do to live the lives they want while having diabetes."

Designed as "a self-management program," this outpatient service has locations at Falmouth and Hyannis hospitals, and Fontaine Medical Center in Harwich. "Given the geography of the Cape, we want to make it as easy as possible for people to get to us," says Deb. All the diabetes educators are either registered nurses or dietitians. "That's one of the strengths of our program: we can help people with both the medical and lifestyle management of their disease."

Diabetes is actually a group of diseases that have in common abnormally high levels of glucose (a type of sugar) circulating in the blood. This may be because the body does not make enough (or any) insulin, a hormone that processes glucose, or the insulin it does make is not strong enough to do the job. The two most significant kinds of diabetes are referred to as type 1 and type 2. In type 1, the immune system destroys the specialized cells that produce insulin. It's sometimes called juvenile diabetes, because it usually begins in childhood or young adulthood, or insulin dependent diabetes, because people who have it must take insulin.

Type 2 is much more common, representing nearly 95 percent of

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# Diabetes

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all diagnosed cases. At first, insulin is produced but the body cannot use it effectively. Over time, insulin production slows and finally stops. Progression of the disease can be delayed – sometimes for many years – by losing weight, changing eating habits, and exercising. At some point, however, it becomes necessary to take medicine that helps lower blood sugar, and eventually, even people with type 2 have to take insulin.

Type 1 does not run in families and its causes are not well understood. Family history is a strong factor in type 2, and there's no question that overweight and physical inactivity are major contributors. Risk increases with age, and is greater among African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

The incidence of diabetes is rising dramatically. In the US, an estimated 23.6 million people have diabetes. More than half are 60 or older; that's nearly one in every four people in that age group. Perhaps most disturbing is that close to 6 million people have diabetes but do not know it.

The danger with undiagnosed diabetes is that out-of-control blood sugar leads to serious complications, including cardiovascular disease (high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke), kidney disease, blindness, impaired wound healing, gum disease, and damage to nerves that may cause erectile dysfunction and require amputation of toes, feet, and even lower limbs. There is no cure, but much can be done to avoid complications when it is managed through lifestyle changes and medication.

Receiving a diagnosis of diabetes can be a shock, but it is the first step toward better health. The person delivering the news will be a primary care physician, but in most cases, that

will be followed by referral to a diabetes educator. If you have diabetes but your doctor has not made a referral, ask for one.

"We want to see anyone who's new to diabetes," Deb says, adding that most insurers cover physician-ordered diabetes education. "We want to give them information and empower them from the start. But diabetes changes the longer you have it." That's why the program is open to anyone who needs it: people who have had diabetes for years but are new to the Cape or have never had diabetes education; those who need a review or re-motivation; those who have difficulty managing their disease or have developed other health problems that have an impact on their diabetes; those

who are transitioning from diet and exercise only to blood-sugar lowering pills, or from pills to insulin, as the disease progresses.

The first visit is a one-on-one assessment covering everything from how long the person has had diabetes, his or her general health, and how the disease is being managed medically to diet, exercise, and other lifestyle issues. "We want to know what you know already and what you need in order to keep doing this for the rest of your life," Deb explains. That might involve instruction on how and how often to check blood sugar,

and setting blood level goals to avoid damaging peaks and valleys over the course of the day.

Central to the Learning for Life program is a pair of two-hour interactive education sessions, to which patients are welcome to bring a family member or other support person. In the first class a diabetes nurse gives an overview of the disease, blood sugar goals, and the medications used to achieve and maintain those goals. Participants get answers to such questions as "What should I do when I'm traveling? Why is it so important to examine my feet? Why do I have to go to the eye doctor and dentist more

“  
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DEB GIBABONS, DIETITIAN AND EDUCATOR

LEARNING FOR LIFE, CAPE COD HEALTHCARE'S DIABETES EDUCATION PROGRAM

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often than other people?"

The second session is taught by a dietitian, who talks about nutrition and physical activity, essential components of living well with diabetes. The emphasis is on heart healthy nutrition, "because for a person with diabetes, the greatest risk is cardiovascular disease," Deb explains. Equally important is physical activity, ideally 30 minutes a day, five days a week. Deb says that losing weight and exercising can significantly delay the onset of diabetes and slow its progression.

Everyone is asked to set personal goals, in terms of weight loss, exercise, a change in eating habits. "Just a few," Deb insists. "Maybe two or three things they want to work on, some short-term, one long-term." At an optional follow-up class three months later, people check in: "Did you reach your goals? Were they realistic ones? Are you ready to set some new ones?" And they have an opportunity to ask questions that have come up in the intervening time.

But classes are not for everyone, Deb acknowledges, so some people opt for individual appointments. "We focus on whatever they need information about and whatever challenges they need help with."

A free, drop-in support group, which meets once a month at each of three locations – Mashpee, Hyannis, and Harwich – is open to anyone who wants to attend. You need not have a physician referral, be enrolled in the self-management program, or even have diabetes yourself. "If a family member has diabetes, everyone's affected. If you live with and cook for someone with diabetes, this is a good way to find out what you need to know," Deb says. People share tips about living with diabetes. An educator is there to facilitate, and to make sure all information exchanged is accurate.

The 53-year-old Brookline native brings years of experience to her work as a diabetes educator. She graduated from U Mass Amherst and has been a registered dietitian for 30 years, and a certified diabetes educator for the past seven. She has worked in a variety of health care settings and still spends part of her time doing medical nutrition therapy at Cape Cod Hospital.

She and her husband, David, decided to move to the Cape in the mid-

## Quickhits

### Learning to live well with diabetes

Learning for Life: A Self-Management Program for People with Diabetes  
Classes: Falmouth and Cape Cod hospitals, and Fontaine Medical Center, Harwich (physician referral required)  
Drop-in support groups (free, open to the public): Mashpee Senior Center, Fontaine Medical Center, and Cape Cod Hospital  
Call 508-299-8194 for days and times

### More information about diabetes

National diabetes information clearinghouse (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health)  
<http://diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/>

American Diabetes Association  
[www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)

90s, when their two daughters were 2 and 5. "We wanted them to grow up near family, and Harwich seemed like a nice place to raise children," Deb says, adding, "Harwich Junior Theater really raised my older daughter." Now 21, she is a student at her mother's alma mater, and her 17-year-old sister is a senior at Harwich High. David is manager of the AAA office in Dennis.

Until recently, the couple's "free" time was devoted to family: their growing daughters and David's aging parents. With the death of his parents and the impending graduation of their younger daughter, Deb and David face a doubly empty nest. "It's a new chapter for us," she says.

Deb sees her job as helping people live well with diabetes "People with diabetes have to deal with it every day. You can't forget about your diabetes. We're here to help them do what they have to do for themselves. Sometimes it's baby steps, and that's OK. You can't change everything at once, but little changes add up."

# Spring Happenings

Spring has finally arrived. Join EPOCH at Brewster as we celebrate the season with fun and educational events.

### *AARP Driver Safety Course*

Wednesday, June 3 • 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

\$12 AARP Members/\$14 Non-Members  
(Fee will be reimbursed upon completion of course)

### *EPOCH Open House*

Tuesday, June 16 • 2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

Light refreshments served

### *Meet the Author – Marcia Monbleau*

Wednesday, June 24 • 3:00 p.m.

A humorous lecture based on her book, "The Inevitable Guest: A Survival Guide to Being Company and Having Company on Cape Cod"  
Reception to follow

### *"Broadway's Golden Era: The 1940's and 50's"* *Lecture & Film Series with Conductor John Hagon*

June 17, July 15 and August 12

Reception to follow

### *Watch for our upcoming 2009 Summer Concerts!*

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