

If you are lean, you cannot be diabetic - Debunking a myth!



Most people associate diabetes with obesity or excess weight, assuming normal-weight individuals are immune to the disease. Nothing can be farther from the truth!

While weight does play a role, diabetes can strike people across the spectrum of body sizes. It is important, therefore, to know more about 'Lean Diabetes', discover its lesser-known nuances and recommend methods and behaviours for its prevention and management.

For a start, let's understand what the term 'lean' indicates.

According to the Body Mass Index (BMI), a golden standard to classify body types for health-related categorisations, there are a few distinct classifications: A person having a BMI of less than 18.5 is classified as underweight, 18.5 – 24.9 is normal (healthy weight: height ratio), 25.0 – 29.9 is overweight, and 30.0 and above is obese.

In the past, people in the lean/normal range BMI i.e. less than 25 kg/m², used to be considered at a low risk for diabetes. However, as stated in a study titled 'Lean Diabetes Mellitus: An emerging entity in the era of obesity', published in PubMed Central®, a study from India on around 10000 type 2 diabetics revealed that around 3.5% of patients were lean, with a BMI < 18.5, with the larger share of around 63% patients having ideal body weight at the time of diagnosis

Introducing Lean Diabetes

Also referred to as Atypical Diabetes or MODY (Maturity Onset Diabetes of the Young), Lean Diabetes is more common in individuals coming from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds or those who have faced post-natal or childhood malnutrition.

Lean Diabetes also seems to be prevalent in youth who are primarily living in developing nations or among minority communities in Western countries. Chronic alcohol consumption and exposure to primary or secondary smoking are some of the external triggers that set off this disease. Both alcohol-related and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease can increase the likelihood of developing Lean Diabetes. Sugar and unhealthy fats in meals can significantly elevate risk, while sleep disturbances can also egg on the onset of Lean Diabetes.

This vulnerability interacts with environmental factors like diet and exercise, to influence risk. Sedentary living or prolonged periods of sitting can disrupt metabolism and lead to insulin resistance. Then, there is the body's "fight-or-flight" response triggered by stress hormones like cortisol which can contribute to diabetes risk.

In addition to the above-mentioned triggers, factors like heredity are also known to play a role, making some people more vulnerable to the disease. Regardless of weight, some individuals are genetically predisposed to diabetes. For example, having close relatives with diabetes, especially lean diabetes, significantly increases an individual's risk. Certain ethnicities have a higher genetic predisposition to diabetes, contributing to a higher prevalence even in normal-weight individuals. Previous gestational diabetes or polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) can also act as a predisposing factor.

Lean yet not immune

Despite having a normal BMI, certain individuals exhibit elevated levels of intra-abdominal adipose tissue and subcutaneous abdominal adipose tissue, indicating a potentially disproportionate distribution of body fat. Muscle mass, not just weight, influences metabolism and insulin sensitivity. An individual with a higher muscle mass and normal BMI might have a lower diabetes risk than someone with less muscle and the same BMI.

Being aware of these risk factors is crucial for early detection and effective management. Remember, Lean Diabetes is no less real or serious than Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes. By shedding outdated stereotypes and focusing on individual indicators, it is possible to ensure that everyone, regardless of body size, receives the timely care they need to get back on track and stay healthy.

Steps to Take Charge

Despite the presence of risk factors, a few simple, proactive measures can significantly reduce an individual's chances of developing Lean Diabetes

Maintain a healthy diet and focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein, limiting processed foods and sugary drinks

Engage in regular physical activity with at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise most days of the week

Prioritize sleep and aim to have 7-8 hours of deep sleep, each night

Manage stress effectively by exploring relaxation techniques like yoga or meditation

Get screened regularly and discuss the family history and risk factors with the doctor

Watch out for the red flags

Early diagnosis is crucial for effective management. Be aware of these potential warning signs of Lean Diabetes:

- Excessive thirst and urination
- Increased hunger
- Unintended weight loss
- Fatigue
- Blurred vision

A visit to a doctor and a few simple blood tests can help in assessing blood sugar levels. In some cases, genetic testing can identify specific subtypes of Lean Diabetes.

Remember, lean diabetes, while challenging, is manageable with the right approach. By understanding the risk factors, taking preventive measures, and seeking timely diagnosis and treatment, it is possible to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

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