

## **The Surprising Link Between Diabetes and Dementia**

By Sheldon Riklon, M.D.

Studies show that **having diabetes can increase your risk of dementia**. There are several ways that diabetes contributes to dementia. Abnormal blood sugar levels, insulin resistance and other chronic diseases associated with diabetes can damage your brain over time.

- **Abnormal blood sugar levels can affect your memory.**  
Stable blood sugar levels are crucial for clear thinking. However, with diabetes, frequent fluctuations in blood sugar can impair your ability to think clearly. Additionally, both high and low blood sugar levels can damage the blood vessels in your brain, making it difficult for oxygen to reach it. This damage can contribute to the development of dementia.
- **Insulin resistance can cause brain cells to break down.**  
With diabetes, the body's cells don't respond as they should to insulin, the hormone that helps your body regulate blood sugar levels. This can lead to problems like inflammation or damage to brain cells, both of which can increase the risk of dementia.
- **Health conditions associated with diabetes are also risk factors for dementia.**  
Diabetes can lead to health conditions like high blood pressure, heart disease and kidney damage. These chronic diseases can all damage the brain and make dementia more likely.

### **The good news is that managing your diabetes can lower your chances of developing dementia.**

By managing your diabetes with medication and lifestyle choices, you can keep your blood sugar levels stable, improve insulin resistance and help prevent other chronic diseases. Lifestyle choices that can reduce your dementia risk include:

- Getting 2.5 hours of cardio exercise per week, such as brisk walking, dancing or riding your bike
- Eating a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats
- Keeping your mind active with activities like puzzles or learning new skills
- Staying connected with friends and family
- Getting 7-8 hours of sleep every night

Work closely with your health care team to create a diabetes plan that fits your needs. By effectively managing diabetes and adopting a healthy lifestyle, you can improve your overall health and potentially reduce your risk of dementia.

*Sheldon Riklon, M.D., is an associate professor in the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Department of Family and Preventive Medicine and a co-investigator with the UAMS Institute for Community Health Innovation.*