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Are You Sure You Won't Get Diabetes?

By John Gilpatrick

This stat is mind-blowing: [Half of all Americans will have diabetes or prediabetes by the year 2020](#), according to a recent projection by UnitedHealth Group. That would make us one sick nation. But is this number really possible—or simply preposterous? To find out, we called *Men's Health's* top diabetes adviser, Keith Berkowitz, M.D., founder and medical director of the [Center for Balanced Health](#) in New York City and author of [The Stubborn Fat Fix](#).

Unlike many doctors who test only their patients' fasting blood sugar levels, Dr. Berkowitz measures post-meal blood sugar, which is also used to diagnose diabetes. It's called an oral-glucose tolerance test, and it's less common, primarily because it takes several hours to complete. But Dr. Berkowitz says that time investment is well spent. That's because he believes post-meal blood-sugar levels actually begin to rise years before fasting levels do. The upshot: A large percentage of people could be going undiagnosed because their doctors are only relying on the fasting blood-sugar numbers.

Based on this, Dr. Berkowitz suggests that the UnitedHealth Group figure might actually be too low. And the rest of what Dr. Berkowitz told us was just as scary.

Men's Health: What's the problem with measuring only fasting blood-sugar levels, like most doctors do?

Dr. Berkowitz: Because post-meal levels go up years in advance of fasting levels, we're only picking up a small percentage of people with prediabetes early. So someone could have prediabetes for 5 to 10 years already before they see their fasting blood sugar elevated. Take a patient I saw recently. Her fasting blood sugar was 92, which is pretty normal. Her one-hour blood sugar was 199, though, which diagnoses her as diabetic. By looking just at the fasting numbers, you're missing a large part of the problem. Very little of your day is actually spent fasting, so it's not a particularly useful measure.

MH: Then why are people still studying fasting blood sugar?

Dr. Berkowitz: I think it something we're used to. Medicine changes very slowly. And it's more convenient. To do a post-meal blood sugar test, someone has to sit there for 3 to 4 hours. I make them sit around in my office, but I think I'm more unusual in that aspect.

MH: So by the time someone realizes they have prediabetes . . .

Dr. Berkowitz: A lot of times they don't even realize it. They miss that whole stage and by the time they know something's wrong, they have full-blown diabetes. And at this point, many of the complications with diabetes are noticeable: eye problems, nerve damage, kidney issues. If it was diagnosed a lot earlier, these things are preventable. That's clearly an issue.

MH: How early do you think people should be getting tested for prediabetes?

Dr. Berkowitz: I'd say by age 30 with a family history. Or if they're suffering from diabetes symptoms like fatigue, concentration problems, excessive urination and excessive thirst. Even if their fasting glucose is normal, further workup should be done. And with early detection, we can stop a lot of the other things that go along with diabetes—like high blood pressure and heart disease.

MH: What can men do to reverse this trend?

Dr. Berkowitz: We just need to change our lifestyle. And it's not just things like diet and exercise, though they are both major components. Sleep also plays a role. When I talk to diabetics, one thing a lot of them have in common is a history of not sleeping well years before they were diagnosed. We're getting hammered in so many different ways, but I think diabetes is something we can really do a better job at preventing. We just need to try.

Think you're safe from diabetes because you're skinny? Not true. Read the [The Thin Man's Diabetes](#), a fascinating and true story about a fit *Men's Health* writer who found out he was a surprising victim of the disease. Thankfully, he found Dr. Berkowitz before it was too late.