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STRICTLY EMBARGOED 5AM 12 July 2020

1.35 million Australians with diabetes take a double hit from COVID-19

People with diabetes have been hit extra hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only has the pandemic impacted their physical health – with disrupted access to diabetes services and the higher risk of serious COVID-19 related illness – but for more than 40% of people with diabetes, COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their mental or emotional health.

People with diabetes are at a higher risk of serious illness and complications of COVID-19. The emotional and mental health support needs for Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic are receiving some attention – but for people with diabetes there are particular concerns.

Diabetes Australia released the survey results today (12 July) to mark the beginning of National Diabetes Week and the launch of its new campaign “Heads Up on Diabetes”.

The campaign is focusing on the mental and emotional health impact of living with diabetes and encouraging people to talk about it and access support if they need it.

The national survey found:

- Almost half of all people with diabetes (47%) have experienced a mental health challenge because of their diabetes in the last twelve months. This was higher (over 65%) for people with type 1 diabetes and women with gestational diabetes.
- Younger people with diabetes under the age of 40 are much more likely to have mental health challenges. There are over 124,000 people with diabetes under the age of 40.
- While just over 40% of people with diabetes have spoken to a health professional about their mental health - more than 80% said they had not been offered professional psychological support, and over 25% were not able to access mental health support then they needed it.
- More than one in three people with diabetes (37%) say they feel burned out by the constant effort required to manage diabetes.
- More than one in four people (26%) said other people’s attitudes and stereotypes about diabetes negatively impacted their mental health.

Diabetes Australia CEO Professor Greg Johnson said it was critical that health professionals, people with diabetes and the broader community recognise the seriousness of the mental and emotional health impact of living with diabetes.

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MEDIA RELEASE



“Diabetes is absolutely relentless. Day in, day out, 365 days a year,” Professor Johnson said.

“People have to keep track of many daily tasks – medicines, blood glucose monitoring, and the numerous ongoing health checks that are required.

“The distress and worry about the long-term impact is real. Two-thirds of people with diabetes are worried about their long-term risk of developing serious diabetes-related complications like losing limbs, eyesight, experiencing kidney failure or heart failure.”

Professor Johnson said the survey revealed people with diabetes need more access to specialised psychological support to help them manage the mental health side of life with diabetes.

“Diabetes is both a physical health and mental health challenge. This survey found significant gaps in people’s ability to access mental health support,” he said.

“Mental and emotional health needs to become a routine part of diabetes care just like seeing a podiatrist or optometrist.

“The mental health challenges associated with living with diabetes can make it harder for people to manage their physical health and increase their risk of developing serious diabetes-related complications.”

Professor Jane Speight, Foundation Director of the Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes, said the evidence around the mental and emotional health impact of living with diabetes had been growing over the past 25 years – and now is the time for change.

“We need to change the mindset that says diabetes is ‘just’ a physical condition. It’s not. The mental and emotional health impact of living with diabetes can be massive,” Professor Speight said.

“It can be a combination of the day-to-day challenges of managing the condition, the anxiety and worry caused by the risk of serious health complications and the accumulation of the impact of other people’s stereotypes, judgment and stigma.

“We need health systems and health policy makers to better consider the mental health aspect of living with diabetes to ensure people can access specialised mental health care and support when they need it.

“All health professionals involved with diabetes need to take action by learning more about the mental health impact of diabetes and developing strategies to ensure that people who need support can access it.”

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