

# MYTHS ABOUT DIABETES MELLITUS

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Diabetes is common and so are myths. Myths about diabetes in the society are a hurdle against the proper management of this easily manageable disease. The aim of this study was to find various myths about diabetes. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was carried out in the private clinic of the author in 2009. 100 consecutive diabetic patients were included in this study. A self administered questionnaire was used to get information about demography and the myths about diabetes in a “Yes” and “No” format. Data was analyzed using the SPSS version 10. **Results:** The most common myth in the diabetic population is “eating more sugar causes diabetes” (89%). It is closely followed by two myths about Insulin which are: “Insulin means it’s the final stage of diabetes” (86%) and “Once you start taking pills or insulin, you can eat anything that you want” (85%). Myths were significantly more common in un-educated people, females and diabetes of less than 5 years duration. **Conclusion:** The prevalence of myths about diabetes is high in un-educated people, females and diabetes of less than 5 years duration.

**KEY WORDS:** Diabetes mellitus, Myths, Treatment.

## INTRODUCTION

Myths are defined as stories shared by a group, as part of the cultural identity. They have a strong influence in the life of individuals and their way of living which also includes seeking treatment during illness. Understanding the myths and misconceptions about the disease, like diabetes mellitus, is important in providing excellent care and health education to both patients and healthy individuals. Diabetes is a lifelong yet a controllable disease with its various short term and long term complications especially when it is not controlled properly. A major health hazard dealt with on a day to day basis need a very scientific understanding and myths only add to the misery of the individual patient because they are great hurdles in the way it should be addressed.<sup>1</sup>

Diabetes has pandemic proportions in our country and we need not only to treat it meticulously but also to have a scrupulous understanding about it. Myths have usually cultural and social backgrounds and usually they stay in a certain society if not challenged by scientific discourse. Lack of education, poverty, lack to health care facilities added with multiple ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups add up to the emergence of many myths. Educational level is protective against myths.<sup>2</sup> People who start believing in myths seek treatment through spiritual, religious and unscientific means or resort frequently to alternative medicine like herbal medicine, aqua-therapy and the like. These behaviors can

have dangerous consequences and emergencies and even deaths can occur due to the lack of understanding of the behavior of a certain disease.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this study was to find various myths about diabetes which prevail in our society.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

We conducted a cross sectional study in the private clinic of the author from January 2009 to December 2009, to assess the prevalence of myths related to diabetes and its treatment. One hundred consecutive patients were selected with various durations of disease. The aims and objectives were explained to the patients and after a written consent these patients were included in the study. The interview consisted of noting down demographic characteristics of the patient with 28 myths which prevail in our society with an affirmative and negative answer.

The interview was in a “Yes” and “No” format. The interview was done by a non-doctor assistant who could not be biased towards the subjects and the interviews took about ten minutes for each case. The results were then analyzed on SPSS version 10.

## RESULTS

The study group consisted of 100 consecutive patients attending the out-patient of the author’s clinic. The demographic characteristics of this study group are given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study group (n=100).**

Demographic characteristic	Groups	Number of patients (Percentage)
Age in years:	0-20	2 (2%)
	21-40	47 (47%)
	41-60	49 (49%)
	61-80	2 (2%)
	>80	0 (0%)
Sex:	Male	57 (57%)
	Female	43 (43%)
Education:	Uneducated	31 (31%)
	Below Matric	41 (41%)
	Matric	10 (10%)
	FA	5 (5%)
	Bachelors	2 (2%)
	Masters	7 (7%)
	Professional	4 (4%)
Occupation:	Un-employed	45 (45%)
	Govt.	22 (22%)
	Semi Govt.	19 (19%)
	Private	4 (4%)
	Self employed	10 (10%)
Years since diagnosis:	<5 years	56 (56%)
	5-10 years	20 (20%)
	10-15 years	22 (22%)
	15-20 years	1 (1%)
	>20years	1 (1%)
Drugs:	None:	2 (2%)
	Diet alone:	5 (5%)
	Herbal & alternative Medicine	29 (29%)
	Orals	51 (51%)
	Insulin	3 (3%)
	Both	10 (10%)

**DISCUSSION**

Myths prevail and stay in the societies due to lack of education, cultural beliefs and dogmas.

These beliefs become such deep rooted that they sound true and get inculcated in successive generations. They may become slightly modified but stay in a society for a very long time unless challenged by scientific discourse. These seemingly benign yet at times dangerous misperceptions can be blatantly misleading. They hinder scientific treatments and the whole mindset of society need to be changed to eliminate the scourge that they can have. To change the behavior of the population we need to educate its masses.<sup>4-9</sup> Myths can sometimes be traced in history, at others they have been devised by anonymous people and not one but a group or probably whole generations. They must be known, traced out, understood and rejected by scientific reasoning. If properly explained, these myths can go out of the society but the job is certainly difficult and time consuming. We don't have many studies of the social aspects of many diseases and very meager literature is available based on the subject. We have however carefully collected almost all the myths and the results are surprising as these myths are common even in people who are educated, though less common than the uneducated lot. Many more such studies must be encouraged to enable us to prevent these myths from creating hurdles for scientific understanding of such common diseases.

We have tried the common myths and the few papers we have found from India and Pakistan about these myths are almost identical except for few.<sup>3,10,11</sup> The most widely believed myth was that eating more sugar causes diabetes. This is not entirely true as it is not directly related to eating sugar, but is very much affected by diet in general. Some people also believe that soaking feet in water helps in decreasing blood sugar levels, a concept which is certainly not true.

Some others are of opinion that herbal medicines are very effective in treatment of diabetes. These sections of people often present late to doctors and with complications as they first seek spiritual or herbal treatment. Nasir et al,<sup>10</sup> reported high prevalence of such beliefs in spiritual treatment in Karachi, Pakistan. Another study conducted in Pakistan, reported similar findings that patients abandoned traditional medicine when their blood sugar went high<sup>11</sup>. People had a misconception that diabetes can occur only in old age. This is not true and they need to be made aware that in regard to age, diabetes spares no age group. There is certainly a higher chance of developing type 2 diabetes as you get older but people of all ages, including children can get diabetic and its pathology is multifactorial.

Another myth that surrounds diabetes is that it is contagious. This was also found in the study

**Table 2: Common myths about diabetes mellitus.**

Myth	Yes (Percentage)	No (Percentage)
1. All diabetes is inherited. If there is no diabetes in my family, I don't have to worry.	42 (42%)	58 (58%)
2. People with diabetes should never eat sugar and sweets.	40 (40%)	60 (60%)
3. You can catch diabetes from someone else.	30 (30%)	70 (70%)
4. Eating too much sugar causes diabetes.	87 (87%)	13 (13%)
5. Once you start taking pills or insulin, you can eat anything you want.	85 (85%)	15 (15%)
6. People with diabetes must eat a special diet.	50 (50%)	50 (50%)
7. There are no natural remedies for diabetes.	12 (12%)	88 (88%)
8. Insulin therapy means it's the final stage of diabetes.	86 (86%)	14 (14%)
9. Insulin causes impotence.	37 (37%)	73 (73%)
10. All insulin is from pork.	10 (10%)	90 (90%)
11. The best way to judge your blood sugar level is by the way you feel.	66 (66%)	44 (44%)
12. If my blood sugar is usually over 180 mg/dl, that is normal for me.	63 (63%)	37 (37%)
13. There is difference between urine and blood diabetes. Urine sugar means mild diabetes.	63 (63%)	37 (37%)
14. You can have orderline diabetes for many years.	72 (73%)	28 (28%)
15. Type I diabetes eventually lead to type 2 diabetes.	47 (47%)	53 (53%)
16. Insulin is a cure for diabetes.	81 (81%)	9 (9%)
17. Once my blood sugar is controlled, I can stop the drugs.	58 (58%)	42 (42%)
18. Before checking blood sugar at my next visit to my doctor, I must not eat anything including my drugs.	64 (64%)	36 (36%)
19. Once you start taking insulin you can never get off from it.	56 (56%)	44 (44%)
20. Diabetes is not that serious of a disease.	46 (46%)	54 (54%)
21. If you are overweight or obese, you will eventually develop type 2 diabetes.	59 (59%)	41 (41%)
22. People with diabetes eventually go blind.	69 (69%)	31 (31%)
23. It's not safe to drive if you have diabetes.	33 (33%)	77 (77%)
24. People with diabetes can't play sports.	67 (67%)	33 (33%)
25. Having diabetes means you can't do certain jobs.	57 (57%)	43 (43%)
26. If children get diabetes, they'll eventually outgrow it.	61 (61%)	39 (39%)
27. Diabetes in women prevents them from having children.	34 (34%)	66 (66%)
28. It's a good idea to soak your feet every day if you have diabetes.	19 (19%)	81 (81%)

done in Pakistan by Nasir et al.<sup>10</sup> Also people are not aware about the normal blood sugar levels, role of lifestyle changes in control and treatment of diabetes and that if not treated diabetes can lead to complications.

The prevalence of myths was found to be higher in females. This is almost similar to what was found in the study by Nasir et al in Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> The higher incidence of myths in females can be attributed to the fact that females are usually less

educated than males in Pakistan. Educational status of people seemed to reduce their belief in the myths and they were better informed about the disease. This is similar to what was found by Nasir et al.<sup>10</sup> This study therefore clearly reflects that prevalence of myths and misconceptions about diabetes and its treatment is high in our country and this could be a major hindrance in control and prevention of diabetes which is a disease of national importance.

## CONCLUSION

Myths and misconceptions about diabetes are prevalent in our society and this can have consequences upon the health seeking behavior of the people. In this study education is shown to be associated with decreased belief in myths. We need to educate people about this disease and its treatment options.

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