ABOUT DIABETES

• Diabetes is a chronic disease in which the body cannot produce or properly use insulin, which the body needs to bring sugar out of the bloodstream and into cells. As a result of high blood sugar levels, damage eventually occurs to blood vessels and organs.

• Symptoms of diabetes include blurry vision, excessive thirst, fatigue, frequent urination, hunger, and weight loss. Persons with diabetes need to have their hemoglobin average blood glucose levels checked every three to six months.

• There are three major types of diabetes. In type 1 diabetes, the body makes little or no insulin, so daily injections of insulin are needed. It is usually diagnosed in childhood. Type 2 diabetes usually occurs in adults. In type 2 diabetes, the pancreas does not make enough insulin to keep blood glucose levels normal, often because the body does not respond well to insulin. The third type of diabetes is gestational diabetes, high blood glucose that develops during pregnancy in women who do not have diabetes.

• More than 90 percent of adults with diabetes have type 2 diabetes. More are at risk due to overweight or obesity.

• Diabetes affects nearly 25 percent of VA’s patient population. The disease is the leading cause of blindness, end-stage renal disease, and amputation for VA patients.

VA RESEARCH ON DIABETES: OVERVIEW

• VA researchers are studying innovative strategies and technologies, including group visits, telemedicine, peer counseling, and Internet-based education and case management, to enhance access to diabetes care and improve outcomes for patients.

• VA researchers are working to develop better ways to prevent and treat diabetes, especially in special populations such as the elderly, amputees, minorities, spinal cord-injured patients, and those with kidney or heart disease.

• VA investigators conducted the VA Diabetes Trial, a multiyear study examining the relationship between glucose control in diabetics and cardiovascular health. The seven-year study included nearly 1,800 patients with diabetes. VA continues to conduct follow-up studies based on the original trial.

• VA researchers are using data from other large studies, such as the VA-DoD Millennium Cohort Study, to examine predictors of diabetes in service members and Veterans. They have found links between diabetes and sleep apnea, poor sleep quality, statin use, and obesity.

• Dr. Andrew V. Schally, a Nobel Prize winner and VA researcher, is leading a team studying growth hormone-releasing hormone agonists’ ability to promote the growth and function of pancreatic islet cells. These new agonists—drugs that act like other substances and therefore stimulate an action in the body—may provide an improved approach to treating diabetes by stimulating the body to release insulin.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1977 – Received the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine (Rosalyn Yalow, PhD), for developing a new way to measure insulin and other hormones in the blood.

1998 – Discovered that an implantable insulin pump offers better blood sugar control, weight control, and quality of life for adult than multiple daily injections.

2009 – Determined, through the VA Diabetes Trial, that intensively controlling blood sugar reduces the risks of heart disease only modestly.

2013 – Documented the link between low blood sugar and dementia in older adults.

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