

Leading by Example: A Father Shows His Family How to Prevent type 2 Diabetes

by *Frenchy Risco*



More than 3.2 million African Americans ages 20 years and older have diabetes, one-third of whom don't know they have it. Type 2 diabetes continues to grow in our community and is now affecting more of our young people. I never paid much attention to statistics like these until an old friend opened my eyes.

My wake up call came when I saw a friend in the hospital with half his right leg gone, the result of diabetes. When I saw him like that—someone I had known for over 50 years—it had a big impact on me. I realized how much I'd been taking my own health for granted and I didn't want my family to face that experience with me. I believed I was fortunate: there was no history of diabetes in my family. I didn't think I was at risk. I was wrong.

I am a 63-year-old African American father who, like most Americans, had too little physical activity and too much fried and fast food in my diet. My view was that if the food wasn't fried with meat on the side, the meal wasn't for me. And as a real estate executive, I drove or took taxis to meet my clients instead of walking the couple of blocks. My ethnicity, age, and lack of physical activity were putting me at an increase risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

After I saw my friend in the hospital, I immediately became involved in *Fit, Fun & Free*, a healthy living program launched by the city of Philadelphia to challenge residents to become physically active and eat healthy. It was high time I changed my lifestyle and encouraged my children to join me. I wanted to reduce my risk for type 2 diabetes so I would be around for all the milestones in my children's and grandchildren's lives.

The program taught me how to cook low-fat healthy meals that taste great. I am working with my family to help them make healthy food choices. I encourage my children and grandchildren to snack on fruit and avoid the chips. I also have become more active. I now walk two to three miles a day. I feel like a different person. I *am* a different person.

This healthy lifestyle is working for the entire family and we are feeling great.

Certain events in our lives happen, and there is nothing we can do about them. Developing type 2 diabetes doesn't have to be one of those things. My buddy was unable to take advantage of the information and resources that may have helped him control his diabetes better and prevent the devastating complications associated with the disease. I have a chance to prevent or delay diabetes in my life, and I choose to be proactive rather than reactive.

The National Diabetes Education Program (NDEP) has created an excellent tool, *More Than 50 Ways to Prevent Diabetes*, that is tailored for the African American community. Using amusing rhymes like "Less on your plate, Nate" and "Snack on a veggie, Reggie," the campaign zeroes in on our ability to use humor to cope with serious matters—one of which is preventing the high prevalence of type 2 diabetes in the African American community. Under the *Small Steps. Big Rewards. Prevent type 2 Diabetes.* campaign, NDEP has developed these creative messages so that we can be more creative about developing healthier lifestyles.

I encourage all fathers to take these tips to heart and use them. Challenge your friends and family. Make healthy living fun.

The science of diabetes prevention is clear -- we need to come up with healthy ways to lose just 5 to 7 percent of our body weight to decrease our risk of developing type 2 diabetes (for a person that weighs 200 lbs. that is only 10 to 15 lbs.) It's not too late. This loss can be achieved by getting 30 minutes of physical activity five days a week and eating healthy foods in smaller portions. This campaign to lose weight through small changes in our behavior is not about looking good, it's about feeling good—for life.

There are many things out of our control, but diabetes prevention is not one of them. Join me in my quest to become an example of health for the family and help get the message out that we all should try to be on the road to a healthier, diabetes-free African American community. For more tips on how you can prevent type 2 diabetes, visit <http://www.ndep.nih.gov> or call 1-800-438-5383 and ask for the *More than 50 Ways to Prevent Diabetes* tip sheet.

Frenchy Risco, a father of four with nine grandchildren, is a real estate developer in Philadelphia. As a member of the National Diabetes Education Program's Small Steps. Big Rewards. Team to Prevent type 2 Diabetes, Risco is leading by example that type 2 diabetes can be prevented in the African American community.

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