

Tackling Diabetes Head On

A public health story from...

Stoddard County Public Health Center



On a breezy summer day last June, Anita Parker walked into the Stoddard County Public Health Center for her annual Pap test. Her caregiver waited in the car. Center staff members know that Anita, a longtime client who is 48, will talk almost nonstop during her checkup, ask after their families, and pick up photos off their desks, cooing at the

baby ones. They will also screen her for high blood pressure and high blood sugar, a customary procedure for all clients. Around 130 people benefit from these two free tests every month.

“Normally, we try to screen for everything when a person walks through our doors,” says Debbie Pleimling, director of the Stoddard County Public Health Center. “We believe in prevention. We’re a very rural area in Missouri’s Bootheel, and health care providers are sometimes scarce. We’re fortunate in our county to have a hospital.”

The Pap test, which checks for changes in the cells of a woman’s cervix and can tell if she has cervical cancer, comes back clean. But Anita’s blood sugar test is another matter. Her blood sugar level

registers a whopping 334; the normal range is between 70 and 120.

“She got real quiet when she learned she might have diabetes,” says Amy Hector, the public health nurse who broke the news. “She asked me to go outside and explain what it meant to her caregiver.”

*“She got real quiet
when she learned she
might have diabetes”*

Hector complied, feeling a special bond with her client, for she, too, suffers from gestational diabetes, a type that occurs only during pregnancy. “I was diabetic twice,” Hector says, “during the pregnancy of my twins and son. I knew my diabetes would go away, that there was an end in sight, but I still needed a lot of support.”

Diabetes, if left unchecked, can damage many parts of the body and lead to heart attack, stroke, blindness, kidney damage, and lower-limb amputation. The good news is that Type 2 diabetes, the kind Anita has, can be managed and largely eliminated with lifestyle changes such as weight loss, a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and regular physical activity. And Hector was quick to point this out, giving Anita encouragement and support every step along the way.

“She went to a doctor she occasionally sees the very next day,” says Hector. “He put her on a diabetic diet, and she lost 25 pounds in two months. I am so proud of her. She learned my phone extension and called every day to give me progress reports. She said she thought I would want to know.”

