

Amputations – 4,400 reasons to take diabetes seriously

More than 4,400 diabetes-related amputations are performed at Australian hospitals every year, most are preventable, and these contribute to the increasing cost of diabetes complications which threatens the long-term viability of Australia's health system.

Diabetes Australia CEO A/Professor Greg Johnson revealed the worrying statistic at the launch of National Diabetes Week in Melbourne today.

“Australia's health system is struggling to manage the growing burden of chronic disease, most notably type 2 diabetes, and the fact that there are more than 4,400 diabetes-related amputations in Australia every year as a result of diabetes underlines how critical this issue is,” A/Professor Johnson said.

“To put that in perspective - today around 12 people will undergo a diabetes-related amputation. Tomorrow - 12 more amputations.

“Experts estimate that spending on diabetes-related amputations, and other costs related to diabetic foot disease, costs Australia around \$875 million every single year.

“Worryingly, surveys show that the general public underestimates the seriousness of diabetes and most people aren't aware of the connection between diabetes and amputations.”

A/Professor Johnson called on the incoming Federal Government and the State and Territory Governments to work together to take decisive action on this national emergency.

“85% of diabetes-amputations are preventable if problems are detected early and managed appropriately,” he said.

“This is why Australia needs a new Diabetes Amputation Prevention initiative to end the tragedy of diabetes-related amputations within a generation.”

A/Professor Johnson was joined by Professor Sophia Zoungas, President Elect of the Australian Diabetes Society outside the Royal Melbourne Hospital where a display of empty shoes was used to highlight the tragedy of diabetes-related amputations.

Professor Zoungas said a comprehensive, integrated approach could reduce the number of preventable amputations.

“Fragmentation of the health system means people are slipping through the cracks,” she said.

For information:

Liam Ferney, Diabetes Australia – 0448 130 925
liamf@diabetesqld.org.au

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“We need to re-orient our health system more strongly towards prevention of diabetes-related amputations through more regular checks and risk assessments, and earlier treatment to keep people with diabetes out of hospital.

“Almost all diabetes-related amputations are preceded by sores or ulcers on the foot.

“If these sores are detected and treated early and effectively then they don’t escalate to a situation where amputation is required.

“People should have their feet checked by a health professional twice a year in line with the annual cycle of care requirements for good diabetes management.”

A/Professor Greg Johnson said it was clear Australia needed to get serious about addressing diabetes.

“The next Federal Government should work with State and Territory Governments to establish and fund a Taskforce dedicated to leading and directing the initiative,” he said.

“Diabetes amputation prevention has to be a priority for every Primary Health Network in Australia.”

For Melbourne father Jake Williams undergoing several amputations represented the low point of living with type 1 diabetes, a condition he has lived with since first being diagnosed aged 11.

“Living with diabetes is a 24/7 job and I probably wasn’t looking after myself as well as I could,” Mr Williams said.

“When I bought a new pair of thongs they were a bit tight on the toes but I didn’t think much of it.

“A wound developed that wasn’t managed as well as it could have been and the next thing I knew I was in hospital for almost three months having parts of both feet, including both big toes, amputated.

“Your big toe mightn’t seem like much hanging off the edge of your foot but the reality was I had to learn to walk again.

“Australians with diabetes need better education so we can look after our feet and stop problems like these developing.”

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Key facts

- There are more than 4,400 amputations every year in Australia as a result of diabetes
- Every year there are 10,000 hospital admissions in Australia for diabetes-related foot ulcers – many of these admissions end with people having a limb, or part of a limb, amputated.
- People with diabetes hospitalised for lower limb amputation have longer stays in hospital than other diabetes-related complications. The average length of stay is around 24 days.
- Diabetic foot disease costs Australia around \$875 million every single year.
- 85% of diabetes-related amputations are preventable if problems are detected early and managed appropriately.

Diabetes Australia is the national body for people affected by all types of diabetes and those at risk. Diabetes Australia is committed to reducing the impact of diabetes. We work in partnership with diabetes health professionals, researchers and the community to minimise the impact of diabetes.

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