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New study suggests COVID-19 could drive Australia's type 2 diabetes epidemic

A new study has found people who develop COVID-19 are at a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

The research from Germany, which was published in *Diabetologia*, found people who developed even mild cases of COVID-19 were 28% more likely to develop type 2 diabetes than people who developed similar respiratory viruses.

Diabetes Australia Group CEO Justine Cain said the organisation was concerned that the pandemic could trigger a wave of future type 2 diabetes diagnoses and stressed the importance of regular diabetes checks.

“The research findings make it clear that Australia needs to start planning for the long-term health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including increasing numbers of people developing type 2 diabetes, today,” Ms Cain said.

Monash University Professor of Diabetes Paul Zimmet AO, who is also an Honorary President of the International Diabetes Federation, pointed out the new research was more evidence of the complexity of COVID-19 and its impact on a person's risk of developing any type of diabetes.

“The ‘take home message’ from the German research was that COVID-19 infection confers an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes. If confirmed, their results strongly support the active monitoring of glucose dysregulation (that is diabetes and prediabetes) after recovery from even mild forms of COVID-19 infection,” Professor Zimmet said.

“COVID-19 can have a major impact on the function of many organs in the body including the lungs, brain, heart and pancreas. By damaging the pancreas, COVID-19 may contribute to the development of diabetes by destroying insulin-producing beta cells. Also, any serious infection like COVID-19 can lead to the development of type 2 diabetes in person at high risk for diabetes or who is living with prediabetes.”

Ms Cain said the study showed the increased importance of regular checks for type 2 diabetes.

“Diabetes Australia encourages people to get checked for type 2 diabetes because people can be living with it and be asymptomatic for years before being diagnosed. Often the first time anyone realises they have diabetes is when they seek healthcare assistance for another issue which is why regular checks are so important,” she said.

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“Current guidelines recommend that all Australians aged over 40 are checked for type 2 diabetes every three years, but we are strongly encouraging the more than 750,000 Australians aged 40 and over who have tested positive for COVID-19 to talk to their healthcare team about getting checked as soon as possible.”

Professor Zimmet said the research showed Australia could be dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 long into the future.

“This research should be a warning that COVID-19 could contribute to increasing numbers of people developing type 2 diabetes and we need to anticipate and devote more funding and resources to support more regular screening in the years ahead,” he said.

Ms Cain said Diabetes Australia would be calling for funding to better support the early detection of type 2 diabetes as part of its Federal Election policy platform.

“There are excellent programs currently running in Australian hospitals that are cheap and simple to implement which can check all people for type 2 diabetes on admission to hospitals and emergency departments,” she said.

“These programs have uncovered much higher rates of type 2 diabetes than previously thought and support early management and treatment when it is most cost-effective.

“We’d like to see more innovative diabetes screening programs rolled out across Australia and this is something we will be asking all political parties to consider at this election.”

About Diabetes Australia

Diabetes Australia is the national organisation supporting all people living with or at risk of diabetes. We put people first. We work in collaboration with member organisations, consumers, health professionals, researchers and the community.

For more information visit: www.diabetesaustralia.com.au

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