

CareWorks' Employee Wellness Programme

Diabetes in South Africa: A Silent Workplace Crisis

Diabetes is one of the fastest-growing health challenges in South Africa. More than **4.5 million South Africans** are living with diabetes, and many more are undiagnosed. As employees juggle work, family, and daily responsibilities, managing—or even identifying—this chronic condition can be difficult.

This article aims to empower South African employees with the knowledge to **prevent, detect, and manage diabetes**, and to encourage healthier, more productive workplaces.

What Is Diabetes?

Diabetes is a condition where the body either **does not produce enough insulin** or **cannot effectively use the insulin it does produce**. Insulin is the hormone that regulates blood sugar (glucose). Without it, sugar builds up in the bloodstream, leading to serious health complications.

There are **two main types of diabetes**:

- **Type 1 Diabetes**: Usually diagnosed in children and young adults. It is not preventable.
- **Type 2 Diabetes**: The most common type, especially among adults. It is often linked to **lifestyle factors** and is largely **preventable and manageable**.

A third condition, **pre-diabetes**, is when blood sugar is higher than normal but not yet high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes. This is a critical window for intervention.

Why Diabetes Matters in the Workplace

Employees living with undiagnosed or poorly managed diabetes may experience:

- Frequent fatigue and low energy
- Poor concentration
- Increased absenteeism
- Higher risk of infections and slow healing
- Long-term complications such as kidney failure, blindness, or amputations

From a business perspective, diabetes contributes to **reduced productivity, higher healthcare costs, and disability-related absences**. But with the right approach, employers can help reduce these risks.

Know the Warning Signs

Many people have diabetes for years without knowing it. Early warning signs include:

- Constant thirst and frequent urination
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Extreme fatigue
- Blurred vision
- Slow-healing wounds
- Tingling or numbness in hands or feet

If you experience any of these symptoms, get your blood sugar checked at a local clinic or pharmacy.

Risk Factors: Who Should Be Concerned?

You're at greater risk for Type 2 diabetes if you:

- Are over the age of 45
- Have a family history of diabetes
- Are overweight or obese
- Live a sedentary lifestyle
- Have high blood pressure or cholesterol
- Are of Indian, Coloured, or African descent (due to genetic predisposition)

Women who had gestational diabetes during pregnancy are also at increased risk.

Take Charge: Preventing and Managing Diabetes

For Employees:

- **Get tested regularly**, especially if you have risk factors.
- **Eat a balanced diet**: Focus on fresh vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and reduce sugar and processed foods.
- **Stay active**: Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise, 5 days a week.
- **Limit alcohol** and **quit smoking**—both can worsen diabetes.
- **Take your medication** and follow up regularly if diagnosed.

For Employers:

- Offer **annual health screening days** for blood sugar, blood pressure, and BMI.
- Encourage a **healthy cafeteria menu** and accessible water stations.

- Promote **physical activity** through walking clubs, fitness challenges, or on-site facilities.
 - Provide access to **wellness coaches** or disease management support programmes.
 - Create a non-judgmental, inclusive environment for employees managing chronic conditions.
-

Support Resources in South Africa

- **Diabetes South Africa:** Offers education, support groups, and resources. www.diabetessa.org.za
 - **Department of Health Clinics:** Free testing and treatment services are available across the country.
 - **Local Pharmacies:** Many offer free or affordable glucose testing.
 - **Discovery Vitality, Momentum Multiply, Bonitas and other medical schemes** often include chronic disease management benefits.
-

A Healthier Workforce Starts with You

Managing diabetes isn't just about medication—it's about daily choices. As an employee, your health directly affects your performance and well-being. As an employer, creating a diabetes-friendly workplace means investing in **long-term health, resilience, and productivity**.

Whether you're living with diabetes or trying to prevent it, know this: **you are not alone, and support is available.**

Take control of your health—get tested, stay active, and eat smart. Your future self will thank you.
