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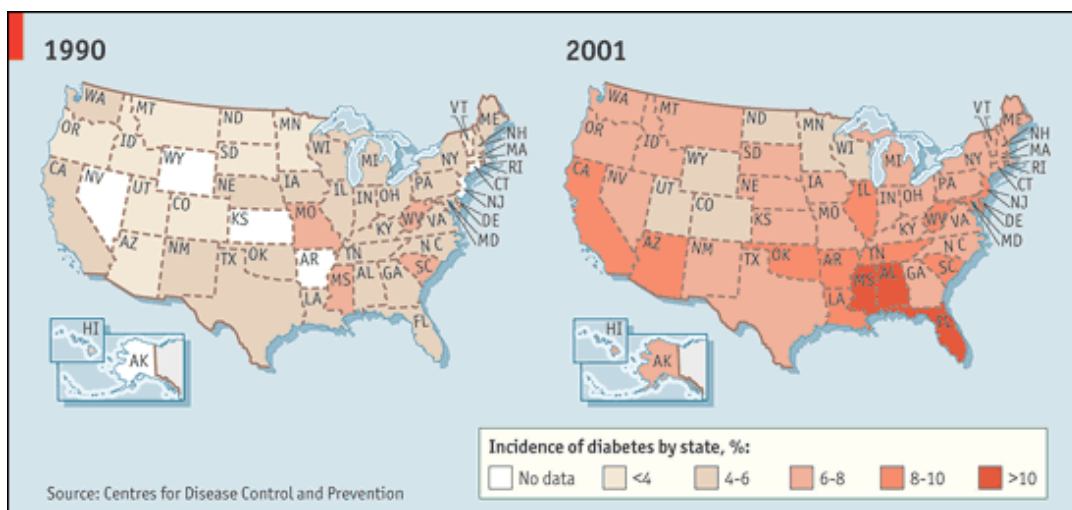
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Diabetes

An American epidemic

Feb 15th 2007 | BOSTON AND DENVER
 From The Economist print edition

Fighting diabetes is as much a social problem as a scientific one



ON February 10th thousands of people crowded into a diabetes exhibit in Denver. They waited in lines to test the newest blood sugar meters. Matt Hoover, a star of the small screen, spoke about how he lost 157lb (71kg) and gained a wife. Representatives dispensed gewgaws. "It's an insulated bag," explained one, "So if you've got a hot chicken..." No one had a hot chicken, though. The diabetic diet can be a Spartan affair. Over at the "Cooking Cardiologist" presentation, a dietician announced that people with diabetes should feel free to enjoy raisins—just not too many raisins.

Not so many years ago such a scene would have been strange. Colorado is the kind of healthy, outdoorsy state where everyone seems to have a big dog and SUVs are splattered with mud. It has the lowest rate of obesity in the nation, and not coincidentally, about the lowest rate of diabetes. Just under 5% of Coloradans have been diagnosed with the disease.

But that is not all that low. And the fact that it is one of the lowest in the country suggests the extent of the diabetes epidemic in America. The disease has become more than twice as common since 1980, and the rate is rising precipitously. According to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 7% of Americans, roughly 21m people, have diabetes. At least 54m Americans have elevated blood sugar levels and are at risk of developing the full-blown disease. Rates are considerably higher among American Indians, African-Americans and Latinos.

The economic costs of the disease were conservatively estimated at \$132 billion in 2002, and the figure is rising. "If you look forward 10 or 15 years," says Dr C. Ronald Kahn of the Joslin Diabetes Centre in Boston, "we really won't be able to afford the amount of health care this is going to cost."

And the human costs are profound. Diabetes contributes to several hundred thousand deaths each year. It doubles the risk of heart disease and stroke, and it is the country's leading cause of adult blindness, kidney failure, and non-traumatic amputations. People with diabetes are also vulnerable to tangential conditions. According to the National Institute for Mental Health, people with diabetes may be twice as likely to become depressed.

Diabetes is not just an American problem, of course. According to the International Diabetes Federation, the global epidemic is "out of control," affecting 246m people worldwide. Most live in poor countries. But among rich ones the United States tops the charts.

Diabetes comes in two varieties, type 1 and type 2. Type 1 is thought to be genetically caused, and accounts for only 5-10% of people: its

prevalence is rising, but slowly. Type 2 used to be called adult-onset diabetes, but that term has become less popular as more and more children are turning up with it. It is the source of the rapid rise in diabetes numbers. Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle are known to increase the risk of developing type 2, and the precipitous rise of diabetes in America is largely linked to the rise in obesity.

To be sure, plenty of obese people never develop diabetes, and plenty of fit people do: the causes of the disease are not purely behavioural. Only last week scientists announced that they had linked several genetic mutations to an increased risk of developing type-2 diabetes. Still, most people could forestall this type of diabetes by keeping their weight down and taking some exercise. And people who develop type-2 diabetes can improve their health by doing the same.

Because of the linkage between obesity and type-2 diabetes, the disease is sometimes patronisingly treated as a fringe issue—another problem for those poor, backwards Southerners. It is true that type-2 diabetes is more common in the fattest states. But dismissing it as a problem of couch potatoes is not especially helpful to the millions who have it. It is better to approach the disease with creativity.

Some politicians have managed to do so. In 2003 Mike Huckabee, then the governor of Arkansas, was diagnosed with type-2 diabetes. He lost 105lb and made improving public health, with an eye on reducing diabetes, a priority of his last two years in office. The state began giving state employees 30-minute exercise breaks and sending students home with “obesity report cards”.

If nothing else, the Healthy Arkansas initiative has encouraged other states to examine their efforts to prevent type-2 diabetes. Individuals bear the primary responsibility for their own health, but government support will not hurt. Mr Huckabee is now running for the Republican presidential nomination. His iron willpower is one of his strongest pluses.

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