



## Contents:

2,3 – Cause and effect  
– Assessing the symptoms  
– Am I your type?  
– Weighing up the risks

4,5 – Keeping healthy  
– Keep it going  
– Complications  
– Prevention is better than cure

6 – Like a rolling stone  
– At risk?

7 – Daily Digest  
– Pancreatitis  
– Pancreatic cancer

8 – Filtered to function  
– Hepatitis  
– Learning your A,B,Cs  
– Co-infection complications



## Lifestyle Lessons



### Dear Seafarer,

In this issue of Health Watch, we discuss what are commonly known as lifestyle illnesses, in particular, those illnesses caused by poor diet, or simply too much of the wrong kind of food. Lifestyle diseases are different from other diseases because they are potentially preventable, and their effects can be reduced by modifications in diet. They usually emerge in middle age after long exposure to an unhealthy lifestyle involving tobacco use, a lack of regular physical activity, and consumption of diets rich in saturated fats, sugars, and salt, typified by "fast foods." This way of living results in higher levels of risk factors, such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity. The risk factors are frequently undiagnosed or inadequately managed until the damage has been done and it is too late.

In previous issues we have dealt with the importance of diet and exercise in maintaining a healthy weight, so as to avoid conditions such as hypertension and

heart disease, but diet and exercise are also key to avoiding diseases such as diabetes (type 2), which is becoming increasingly common amongst the seafaring community. In some cases, diabetes can become so uncontrolled that treatment in hospital is necessary. Severe dehydration and very high blood glucose levels can be extremely serious and potentially life threatening if left unchecked.

We examine other medical conditions caused by poor diet, notably kidney and gallstones as well as diseases affecting the pancreas. We also look at diseases of the liver; one of the most important organs of the body. Finally we take a look at hepatitis. Hepatitis is one of the biggest causes of cirrhosis of the liver which, if left untreated can kill. Cirrhosis is not only caused by excessive alcohol intake, but also by viral hepatitis.

Your questions and comments are welcome. Please feel free to contact us at the e-mail address that appears on the back page.



## Cause and effect

As a seafarer, it is important that you understand the risks and symptoms associated with diabetes, particularly as not caring for your body properly, through a poor diet and a lack of exercise, is a key cause of this illness.

Diabetes is a condition in which glucose is trapped in the bloodstream and cannot get to

the cells used by the body for energy. Insulin normally helps to transfer the glucose to these cells but if the pancreas, where insulin is produced, is not functioning as it should, then lower or no levels of insulin are produced.

According to the World Health Organization, 346 million people worldwide have diabetes and recent research shows

urban populations in South Asia are increasingly at risk.

Awareness of what causes diabetes is important in order to avoid health complications but if you have already been diagnosed with diabetes, you should learn how best to manage the condition as this will help you to stay healthy.

## Assessing the symptoms

It is important to watch for symptoms and seek medical help if you are suffering from any one of them. The main symptoms include:

- + Extreme tiredness
- + An increased unquenchable thirst (as the body is trying to get rid of glucose, this makes it dehydrated, leading to feeling thirsty)
- + Urinating more frequently, especially at night
- + Unexplained weight loss is another sign, as the body starts to burn up fat cells to try

and gain some energy. This can lead to a critical emergency, because a bi-product of the burning of the fat cells is ketones, which are toxic to the body

- + Sufferers may also complain of blurred vision because glucose builds up in the lens of the eye, which could prove extremely dangerous at sea
- + Symptoms for both types are similar, though in Type 2 they are not as pronounced as the pancreas is still producing some insulin.







## Am I your type?

There are two main types of diabetes, both of which can lead to serious health problems if not treated properly.

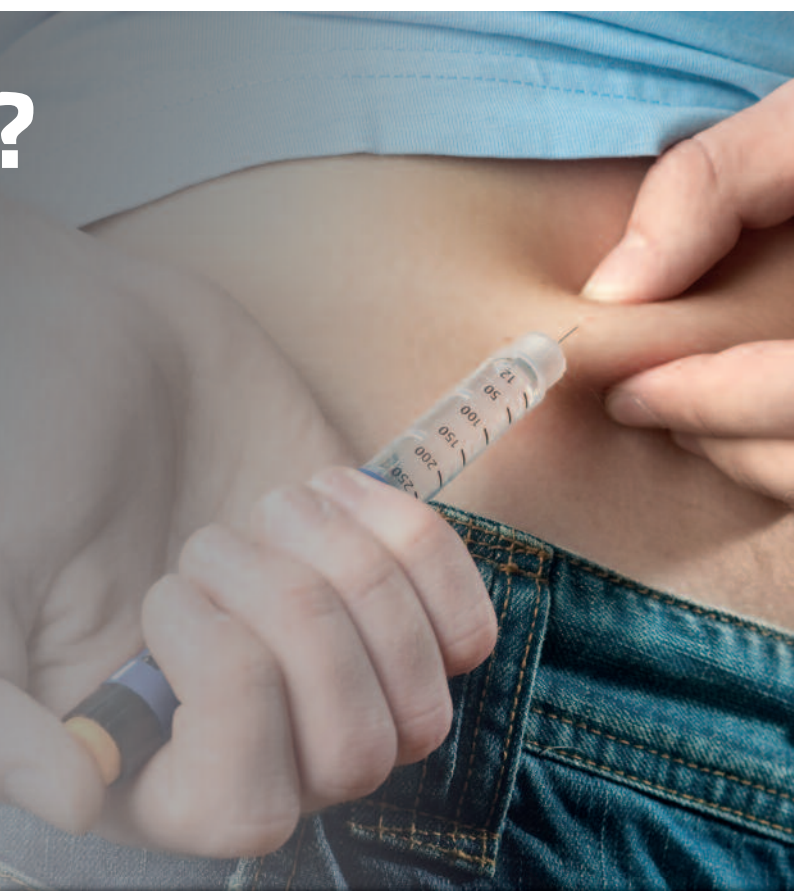
**Type 1** diabetes happens when the body is not able to produce insulin. This form of diabetes is often diagnosed in childhood and treatment is through regular insulin injections or by use of an insulin pump.

**Type 2** diabetes is more common and is a condition which usually develops at a later age. This form of diabetes means the body can't make enough insulin or that the insulin which is produced, doesn't work properly (insulin resistance).

Depending on your diagnosis, type 2 diabetes can be treated by focusing on diet and physical exercise alone, or by combining this with tablets but as type 2 diabetes can get worse with time, insulin treatment may be needed at a later stage.

Some age groups and ethnicities are more at risk of diabetes than others. For example, those over the age of 25 from South Asian and African Caribbean backgrounds, and people over the age of 40 from Caucasian backgrounds, are more likely to develop type 2 than people from other backgrounds.

There are other, rare forms of diabetes, such as gestational diabetes – a condition which can affect pregnant women.



## Weighing up the risks

According to Cathy Moulton, Clinical Advisor at campaign charity Diabetes UK: "Diabetes has become an epidemic. It is escalating so fast because of problems with obesity." In the UK alone, one person is diagnosed with diabetes every three minutes – that's 3,000 new cases each week.

Being overweight is the biggest risk factor when it comes to developing Type 2 diabetes – about 80% of people who are diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes are heavier than is healthy for their height.

"It's carrying weight round the middle that is the problem. So, a really easy way of seeing if somebody is at risk is to get a tape measure and measure them round the middle," Ms Moulton said.

In men, if their waist size is over 94cm (90cm for South Asian men), or 80cm for women, this puts them at high risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.

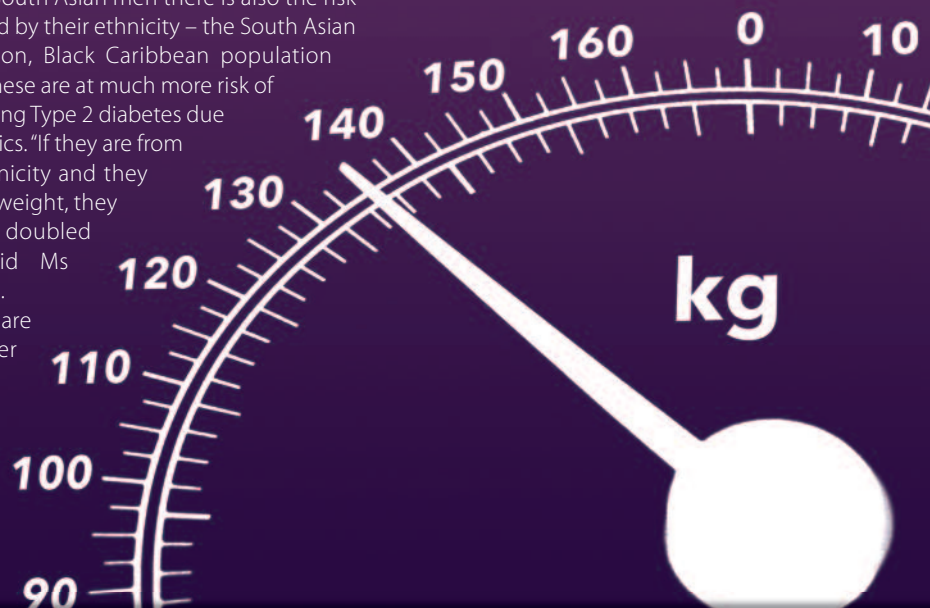
A senior maritime doctor told Health Watch: "Non-insulin dependent diabetes is a

problem globally and is associated with the epidemic of obesity and high-calorie diets becoming more prevalent around the globe."

With South Asian men there is also the risk increased by their ethnicity – the South Asian population, Black Caribbean population and Chinese are at much more risk of developing Type 2 diabetes due to genetics. "If they are from that ethnicity and they are overweight, they have a doubled risk," said Ms Moulton.

There are also other risk factors such as

family history and age, as the risk increases when you turn 40.



# Keeping healthy



As a seafarer, diabetes is an important issue for you, in terms of fitness for duty, risks of being at sea and issuance or renewal of professional certification. Most seafarers will undergo pre-voyage and periodic medical assessments where diabetes or the precursor condition, metabolic syndrome, is likely to be diagnosed.

Seafarers found to have diabetes should undergo testing for the complications of the illness and have their diet and medications adjusted and stabilised before going to sea.

When first diagnosed, people with Type 2 diabetes are often asked to look at their diet and, if they are overweight, take more physical activity. These measures can often, for a length of time, keep blood glucose levels under control. But diabetes is a progressive condition and, as the pancreas wears out further, most sufferers end up taking medication. Of these around half will go on to need insulin injections.

At the discretion of the shipping company, diabetic seafarers are able to go to sea with well-controlled diabetes and for those with the condition, you must self-manage your own daily glucose monitoring, diet, exercise and work schedule.

## Keep it going

If you have diabetes and you are taking medicine or insulin injections, once you start to feel better you might be tempted to stop taking these medicines but it is VERY important that you keep taking them. If you stop taking your medicine this could be damaging for your health or even life threatening – to give yourself the best chance of living a healthy life, follow the medical advice you have been given and keep taking your medicine!

## Complications

Dangers which could arise on board if your diabetes is not properly managed include diabetic ketoacidosis (when the body breaks down fat as an alternative source of fuel, causing a build-up of a by-product called ketones, which disrupt the metabolism). This is life-threatening and can result in a vessel diversion or air evacuation.

If you are treating your diabetes with insulin, there is always a possibility that the balance between what you are eating, the insulin

you are being given and the physical activity you are taking, will not match up and you suffer from a 'hypo' episode when the blood sugar drops low. You then need fast-acting glucose to get it back up again and this can be problematic on board.

## Prevention is better than cure

To try and prevent Type 2 diabetes in the first place, you should aim to control your weight with a healthy, balanced diet, take regular exercise, maintain a low carbohydrate diet and get regular medical screening.

If there isn't much opportunity for physical activity on your ship, try this technique:

March on the spot for one minute, to the point where you are out of breath and your heart is beating fast. If you do this 10 times through the day, you will be getting everything working, using up calories and getting fitter. It is important to take responsibility for your own health.



## LIKE A ROLLING STONE

*As a seafarer, you are travelling for months at sea and gallstones and kidney stones can be a major problem if you suffer from either of these conditions when far from shore.*

### GALLSTONES

Gallstones are usually made of cholesterol and take the shape of small stones, formed in the gallbladder. Usually they do not cause any symptoms but if a gallstone gets trapped inside the gallbladder, blocking a duct, this can cause an intense abdominal pain (biliary colic) that can last up to five hours.

Other symptoms of gallstones include inflammation of the gall bladder, which can lead to intense, persistent pain, a fever of 38° and jaundice (a yellowing of the eyes and skin). If a gallstone moves into the pancreas, this can also cause complications, making the pancreas irritated and inflamed, with intense abdominal pain.

Another serious complication is gallstone ileus, which is a blocking of the bowel, leading to symptoms such as constipation and vomiting.

A small organ beneath the liver, the gallbladder's main purpose is to store bile – a liquid created by the liver which is used to digest fats.

## AT RISK?

If you are overweight, you are more likely to develop gallstones, so it's important to keep a healthy, balanced diet and to exercise regularly. Most cases of gallstones are found in people over the age of 40, so if you are middle-aged and overweight, your chances of getting gallstones are particularly increased.

If you do develop gallstones, this can be treated through keyhole surgery and gallbladder removal. Though non-surgical treatments can break up the gallstones, they usually return so surgery is the preferred cure. You can live perfectly healthily without a gallbladder.

The pain of kidney stones can be extreme but the causes are varied. Men are more likely to get them than women and unfortunately, around half of people who have suffered from a

kidney stone will get another one within 10 years.

You might be more likely to get kidney stones if you are between the ages of 30 and 50 or if you have a family history of kidney stones, but other contributing causes includes too much salt or protein in your diet or not drinking enough.

To lessen your risk of getting kidney stones, you should avoid eating an excess of salt (no more than 3g each day) and eat less meat, poultry and fish, as these food types increase the level of uric acid (one of the materials which kidney stones are made from in your urine).

If you have suffered from kidney stones in the past, you should increase the amount of water you drink, aiming for clear instead of yellow urine. Your doctor may also prescribe medication to help reduce your uric acid levels.

### KIDNEY STONES

Kidney stones are extremely common. Between five to 10 out of every 100 people will experience the pain associated with kidney stones at some point though most people who suffer from kidney stones for the first time will get them between the ages of 20 and 50.

The kidneys help to keep your blood in good condition, by filtering out waste products and water to create urine.

A major cause of kidney stones is an imbalance of salts or minerals in your urine, which then cluster into crystals and are usually extremely small. Although they usually pass through the body without difficulty, these crystals can build up, forming a kidney stone. Kidney stones can also move out of your kidney into the ureter, causing immense pain.

Symptoms of kidney stones include:

- + A severe pain in your back, on one or both sides
- + Excruciating pain which occurs suddenly, in spasms, usually in your back beneath your ribs, your abdomen, your groin or genitals
- + Vomiting
- + Frequent need to urinate or a burning sensation when going to the toilet
- + Blood in your urine

If left untreated, kidney stones can lead to infection or kidney damage. Though kidney stones are usually passed through the body without difficulty, larger ones may need a non-surgical procedure to break up the stone for easier passing out of the body, or if the stone is very large, surgery for full removal.



The pancreas is an organ and a gland, which produces and releases digestive enzymes and the hormone insulin, to other parts of the body. It is about six inches long and rests near the bottom of your ribs.

The pancreas is important because the enzymes it produces help to break food down, while insulin enables stability of blood sugar levels.

There are two main health issues associated with the pancreas – pancreatitis and pancreatic cancer.

## Pancreatitis

A condition in which the pancreas becomes inflamed quickly, acute pancreatitis can be a mild problem which resolves itself but in some cases, the condition can become acute and even life threatening. A different condition, chronic pancreatitis, involves an inflammation of the pancreas which lasts for a number of years.

Common symptoms of acute pancreatitis include:

- A sudden, severe pain in the centre of your stomach
- Feeling sick
- Vomiting

If you are suffering from any of these symptoms, you should inform your ship's medical officer immediately.

## Cause and effect

Acute pancreatitis is thought to be caused by problems with enzymes in the pancreas, where these try to digest the pancreas itself. The condition is linked to gallstones, which are found in over 50% of cases and excessive alcohol consumption, which is a feature of around one quarter of all cases.

If you reduce your alcohol intake levels and lessen the risk of gallstones by retaining a healthy diet, this will help you to lessen the probability of developing pancreatitis.

Acute pancreatitis is a condition more commonly found in elderly or middle-aged people, but it is possible to get the condition at any age. There is currently no cure for the condition but with proper medical monitoring of the body while the problem persists, patients can recover well.

Alcohol-related pancreatitis is more commonly found in men and women are more likely to develop it after having gallstones.

# Daily digest



## Pancreatic cancer

This form of cancer occurs when a tumour develops in the pancreas but it usually doesn't cause any symptoms in the early stages, which can make it difficult to detect and diagnose. Initial symptoms may include unexpected weight loss, pain and jaundice. Doctors can detect for pancreatic cancer by physically examining the abdomen, carrying out blood tests to detect jaundice and an ultrasound to detect tumours.

Pancreatic cancer can happen to anyone but it is quite rare among younger people and more common in people aged 50 to 80. Men are more likely to develop this cancer than women, as are people who smoke, have diabetes or who suffer from chronic pancreatitis.

Surgery is often the only method of curing this type of cancer, whereby the tumour is removed, but this treatment is not suitable for all cases. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy are also treatments which may be considered.



## Filtered to function

The liver is an important organ with many functions, including detoxification, protein synthesis and producing chemicals required for digestion.

This vital organ can become diseased owing to alcohol misuse, so it is important to keep your alcohol consumption at a reasonable level in order to avoid complications. Every time your liver filters alcohol, some cells within the liver die and although it can regenerate, excessive alcohol consumption can be extremely damaging to the liver over time.

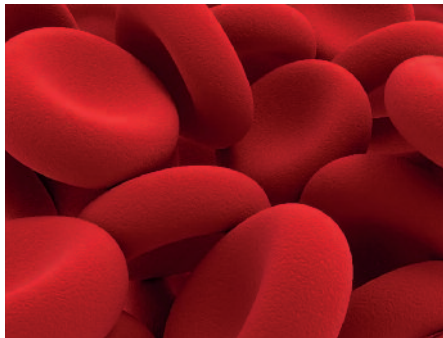
Cirrhosis of the liver is the last stage of alcoholic liver disease and occurs when inflammation over a long period of time,

causes scarring of the liver and a loss of liver function and this is a serious condition which can prove fatal.

Cirrhosis causes irreversible damage but in a small number of cases, stopping drinking alcohol straight after diagnosis can help to prevent more damage from occurring and aid some recovery of liver function. Unfortunately, a liver transplant may be required in severe cases of cirrhosis. The best method of avoiding this disease is not to 'binge drink' and to avoid drinking alcohol to excess, by sticking to recommended limits for alcohol consumption (three to four units of alcohol a day for men and two to three units for women).



## Hepatitis



A disease affecting the liver, hepatitis refers to an inflammation or swelling of the liver, which can happen because of a viral infection or due to exposure of the liver to harmful substances like alcohol.

Some kinds of hepatitis pass without causing major or permanent damage to the liver but others can be more serious and remain for long periods, causing cirrhosis (scarring) of the organ and even liver failure.

Symptoms of hepatitis caused by infection are often flu-like and can include:

- + Feeling sick or vomiting
- + Muscle and joint pain
- + Headache
- + A high temperature in excess of 38°C
- + Jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin)

Chronic hepatitis symptoms include:

- + Depression
- + Feeling tired all the time
- + Jaundice
- + Feeling generally unwell

## Learning your A,B,Cs

**The main types of viral hepatitis are:**

**Hepatitis A**, which is caused by the hepatitis A virus and is the most common viral hepatitis. This is rarer in western countries and occurs mainly in countries with poor sanitary and sewage disposal facilities. Hepatitis A is often contracted by putting something in your mouth which has come into contact with the faeces of someone infected with hepatitis A. Usually a short-term illness, hepatitis A often passes within three months and there is no specific treatment, though painkillers can help with some of the symptoms.

**Hepatitis B**, which is caused by the virus of the same name, is found in blood and bodily fluids and can be passed on through sharing drug needles or through unprotected sex. This disease is common in China, central and Southeast Asia and part of Africa. People who do not recover from this disease early on (the body can fight off the disease to a certain extent), develop a long-term infection from this disease known as chronic hepatitis B.

**Hepatitis C** is by far the most common kind of viral hepatitis in western countries. Caused by the hepatitis C virus, this illness is found in the blood and bodily fluids of infected individuals. As the disease holds higher concentrations in the blood than in other bodily fluids, it is usually transmitted through blood-to-blood means, such as by sharing needles for injecting drugs.

The disease has flu like symptoms and in around a quarter of cases, the body can fight it off of its own accord, but for the rest of cases, chronic hepatitis occurs and this stays in the body for many years. In England, it's most commonly spread through sharing needles to inject drugs, which account for nine out of 10 cases. Antiviral medications are a main treatment, though these can lead to a number of undesirable side effects.

There is a vaccination available for both hepatitis A and B, but not C. Diagnosis for viral hepatitis is through a simple blood test.

## Co-infection complications

Hepatitis C and HIV can often be found in the same patient as often, the method of infection can be the same – through sexual intercourse, exposure to blood (such as sharing needles when injecting drugs), or from a mother to her newborn baby. HIV and hepatitis C are diseases which can lead to serious health complications. It is important to protect yourself and prevent the spread of these diseases by using condoms during sex and if you inject drugs, don't share needles.

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