Peer Mentors Help Black Veterans Control Diabetes

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When a group of African-American veterans with diabetes teamed with diabetic mentors who'd previously had glucose control problems of their own, they were able to control their blood sugar levels better than other vets with the condition who'd been offered financial incentives, according to a new study published in the Annals of Internal Medicine and reported in a University of Pennsylvania press release.

The research team concentrated on African-American patients because past studies revealed this population group had higher diabetes rates and more health problems caused by the disease than other demographic groups.

For the study, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine selected a group of 118 African-American former soldiers, aged 50 to 70, who had generally poor glucose control. Then scientists randomly divided participants into three groups.

In the first group, patients received standard diabetes care (this was the control group). The second group received peer mentoring from coaches who had formerly struggled with poor glucose control. Participants in the third group were promised $100 for every one-percent drop in their glycosylated hemoglobin levels (HbA1c)—a marker of diabetes control.

The results? Findings showed that during the six-month study, it was the veterans in the mentored group who dropped their HbA1c by almost one percent (from 9.8 to 8.7), while those who'd been offered the benjamins only dropped four-tenths of one percent (from 9.5 to 9.1). Vets in the control group only saw their HbA1c level go down by one-tenth of one percent (from 9.9 to 9.8).

Researchers believe these findings show that peer mentors can help improve diabetic patients' glucose control through one-on-one support, and that this approach could provide larger benefits at low cost. What's more, scientists said future diabetes research on the peer mentor-patient relationship will likely focus on improving effective mentorship techniques and skills.

Did you know sharing insulin pens can put you at risk of blood-borne diseases such as HIV? Click here to learn more about how to protect yourself and your loved ones.

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