

News Release

15 June 2011

Parents urged to be aware of diabetes symptoms in children

As part of National Diabetes Week (12 – 18 June), NHS Diabetes and Dr William Ward, a paediatric diabetes specialist at Dorset County Hospital, are urging parents to be aware of the signs and symptoms of type 1 diabetes in children.

Type 1 diabetes can occur in any child at any age, even in babies and toddlers. Often the symptoms go unrecognised and the disease is only diagnosed when the child becomes critically ill with a potentially life threatening condition called diabetic ketoacidosis.

Symptoms of type 1 diabetes in children include:

- feeling very thirsty all the time
- passing urine very frequently and wetting the bed
- weight loss
- excessive, unexplained tiredness
- blurred vision
- sweet or fruity smelling breath

NHS Diabetes is a national organisation supporting improvement in diabetes services and working to embed safe, evidence-based best practice across the diabetes community.

Anna Morton, Director of NHS Diabetes, said: “All too often children are becoming seriously ill before they are diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. That’s why we are working with our paediatric diabetes network to ensure that healthcare professionals are alert to the symptoms of type 1 diabetes in children, and those children with the disease, no matter where they live in England, get access to the same high quality care.”

Dr William Ward, a paediatric diabetes consultant at Dorset County Hospital, said: “Diabetic ketoacidosis or DKA is a life threatening condition, and tragically children do die as a result. But it is preventable if diabetes can be detected early.

“I urge parents to be alert to the symptoms – excessive thirst, going to the toilet very frequently, weight loss and unexplained exhaustion – so they can ask for their children to be checked out quickly. A very quick simple test done at the GP surgery or out of hours centre can instantly tell us if a child is likely to have type 1 diabetes.

“It is very important not to delay until the following day if parents are suspicious that their child has these symptoms. The sooner we know, the sooner we can start appropriate treatment and so avoid DKA.”

Dr Ward has been at Dorset County Hospital for 10 years and looks after around 100 children and young people with diabetes along with a team that includes a specialist nurse and dietitian. Last year (2010) DCH had 15 children and young people admitted with diabetic ketoacidosis.

Angela Allison’s daughter Claudia was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 2008 at the age of seven, after she became critically ill, despite having seen her GP. Angela has since set up a support group, Diabetes Power, to raise awareness of type 1 diabetes symptoms in children and improve diagnosis.

Angela said: “Claudia became ill one week in the spring of 2008. She started to drink a lot and was going to the toilet much more than usual, she was also completely exhausted and losing weight.

“We took her to the GP who diagnosed a throat infection and gave us antibiotics. We also saw the health visitor at the surgery and told her about Claudia’s symptoms. I was sure that Claudia didn’t have a throat infection, so later that day, when the surgery was closed I went to a walk in centre at our local hospital. The GP there asked me about Claudia’s symptoms and sent me straight up to the paediatric ward. Claudia was too ill to walk by this point, so I had to carry her through the corridors.

“As soon as we arrived on the ward Claudia was taken to a room where, after being asked again about her symptoms, a finger prick test was taken. At that point the doctors said they were 99% sure Claudia had type 1 diabetes and was in diabetic ketoacidosis – a life threatening condition. She was admitted to the high dependency unit.

“Type 1 diabetes is five times more common than meningitis, and yet it feels like awareness of diabetes is much lower despite the fact it too is a life threatening illness. Nothing can stop the onset of type 1 diabetes, but better awareness of the symptoms among parents and healthcare professionals can prevent children becoming critically ill.”

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Notes to editors

1. NHS Diabetes is a national organisation supporting improvement in diabetes services. Its strategy is to embed safe, evidence-based best practice across the diabetes community. Further information about the work of NHS Diabetes is available at www.diabetes.nhs.uk.
2. Further information about the work of Diabetes Power is available at <http://www.diabetespower.org.uk> and a film of Angela telling her story is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NZxUR2dFLQ>.

3. Diabetes Week is Diabetes UK's (the charity for people with Diabetes) annual UK-wide awareness and fundraising week. This year Diabetes Week is 12–18 June 2011. More information is available at http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Get_involved/Diabetes-Week/.

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For more information or to arrange interview, photo and filming opportunities please contact Communications Manager Susie Palmer on 01305 254683, susie.palmer@dchft.nhs.uk (Mon to Wed) or the Chief Executive's Office on 01305 254645 (Thurs and Fri).