

Special Report

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SLOWLY AND EXPENSIVELY ...

DIABETES CAN KILL YOU

THIS IS HOW BAD IT CAN GET ...

... BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THAT WAY



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail

Bill Hall, 64, of Barbour County, had a port in his arm so a kidney dialysis machine could clean his blood three times a week. Diabetes took his leg and kidneys. In January, he died of heart failure brought on by diabetes. "He was a wonderful man," said nurse Barbara Weaner.



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail

During the winter of 2010-11, Everette Ray Roberts, of Mingo County, was constantly thirsty. He had dizzy spells. He'd wake up sweating. A doctor referred him to diabetes counselor Vicki Lynn Hatfield. "I lucked out," Roberts said. "If it hadn't been for Vicki, I'd probably be in kidney failure now."

'Diabetes is not for sissies'

By Kate Long
Staff writer

ELKINS — For four hours, Bill Hall used to lie on a padded vinyl recliner, one arm stretched out, two thick needles sticking out of it. One needle drained the blood from his body. The other put it back.

His blood ran through a humming kidney dialysis machine. The machine cleaned it of toxins. His kidney used to do that before it quit working.

Hall, 65, fought in Vietnam. One of his legs was amputated at the knee. He didn't lose it to the war. He lost it to diabetes, which cut off the circulation to his foot. His leg had to be amputated so gangrene wouldn't infect his whole body.

"Diabetes is not for sissies," he half-joked in December.

Some days, he showed up at the Elkins kidney dialysis clinic in the dark, at 5 a.m. Three days a week, so do about a dozen others. Before the sun came up, they all lay on the vinyl recliners, each doing the same thing.

Lona Kittle, who used to run a diner in Belington, can't see out of one eye. Diabetes blinded it. She hopes to save the other. She likes the recliner in the corner.

Linton Wright, a retired Forest Service soil scientist, used to maintain an active schedule as a Jehovah's Witness minister. He can't do that anymore. He doesn't have any energy after running his blood through the machine.

Three days a week, patients come to the clinic and attach themselves to a machine for four hours. "After you're finished, you go back home and recover," Wright said. "The day is shot."

They're all in Stage 4 kidney failure. Usually, it could have been prevented, says nurse practitioner Barbara Weaner.

"We have people in their 20s coming to this clinic," Weaner said. "It's happening earlier and earlier. People don't understand until it's too late that they can prevent it. It's sad."

Hall lost his job after his kidneys shut down, because he had to be on dialysis three days a week. He used to travel a lot for his job. "I loved to go places," he said in November. But he couldn't skip treatments.

He went on disability. "I didn't have much choice," he said. The toxins kill a person if they stay in the blood.

"They've got mobile units you can take home, but people get infections from that," he said. He lived on an isolated Barbour County farm, "so far out, I don't want to risk it."

In December, he was hoping for a kidney transplant. "As long as he stays on dialysis, he probably won't die of kidney failure," Weaner said then. "Ninety percent of people on dialy-

CHRONIC KIDNEY DISEASE No symptoms until it's too late

- Type 2 diabetes takes six to 10 years to develop. During this "prediabetes" time, it can be prevented with exercise and diet. Full-blown diabetes can be controlled and slowed through exercise, diet, and medication, as needed.

- Uncontrolled diabetes can lead to blindness, neurological damage, leg or arm amputation and chronic kidney disease.

- A person can lose 80 to 90 percent of kidney function and not have symptoms. It doesn't hurt. The amount, look and smell of urine does not change.

- Diabetics are advised to get a microalbumin urine test every year. If kidney disease is caught early, it can be reversed, and dialysis can be avoided.

- Symptoms of advanced kidney disease include swollen ankles, feet and hands; shortness of breath; high blood pressure; confusion; poor appetite; nausea and vomiting; dry, itchy skin; and fatigue.

- At particular risk are diabetics, people with hypertension and/or heart disease and obese people.

- For more information, visit the National Kidney Foundation website at <http://kidney.org>

Source: National Kidney Foundation

sis die of heart attack or stroke."

In early January, at age 64, Bill Hall died of heart failure. "It was heartbreaking," Weaner said.

Dialysis in W.Va. costs \$147 million a year and counting

In 2009, 1,897 West Virginians were on dialysis, according to the National Renal Data System. Their dialysis treatment cost more than \$147 million. Taxpayers pay much of that.

Hundreds more West Virginians go on dialysis every year. The number has doubled since 1993, when there were 929. "Dialysis clinics are popping up everywhere in West Virginia," said Gina Wood, director of the West Virginia Diabetes Prevention and Control Program.

Nobody knows exactly how many clinics there are, since existing health-care facilities don't have to get a certificate of need from the state Health Care Authority if they open one. But as of this spring, 35 clinics have certificates

SEE DIALYSIS, 5C

'It's up to you whether you do or you don't'

By Kate Long
Staff writer

WILLIAMSON — The winter of 2010-11, it snowed a lot in Mingo County. Fifty-four-year-old Everette Ray Roberts was shut in for days, "me and my dog," in a small trailer perched on a steep hillside near Matewan. "I was constantly dizzy and thirsty," he remembers. "With all the snow, I wasn't getting out and walking around, doing stuff. I'd gained a lot of weight. My eyes got blurry.

A rugged bachelor, Roberts has three ruptured discs in his back "from heavy lifting," he said. "Every job I've ever worked was brute labor, steel mills, basic labor. That takes its toll on a person's body."

"I wondered if I was going nuts from being shut in. I'd get so shaky, shaky, sitting on the couch watching TV, and I was pouring down the 24-ounce bottles of pop, five or six of them a day. It was like adding gasoline to the fire, all that sugar, but I didn't know it.

"All I knew was, I was terrible thirsty. I kept a gallon of water sitting beside me for when I ran out of pop."

Then he started gasping for breath. "I couldn't sleep. I'd get real, real sweaty." He had to keep running to the bathroom. "I thought maybe it was high blood pressure or something."

"I didn't have a clue what was going on. I had no idea what danger I was in."

He was one of an estimated 69,000 West Virginians who have diabetes, but don't know it.

Roberts "grew up rough on a humungous farm" in Wayne County, he said, where "all us kids worked hard to make the place go, and our dad taught us to deal with problems and not complain." He toughed it out.

Living on an isolated Mingo hillside, "going to the doctor in the snow is not exactly easy, and it's expensive," he said.

When he finally did go, "the doctor said, you've got all the symptoms of diabetes. My sugar was up to the high 400s. My A1C, the three-month blood sugar, was 12.5." Normal A1C is around 2. Anything above 7 is considered bad.

"The doctor said it was a good thing I didn't wait any longer to come in."

His doctor referred him to diabetes educator and nurse practitioner Vicki Lynn Hatfield in Williamson. Hatfield and her partner help about 500 of Mingo's estimated 3,500 diabetics figure out how to control it from day to day, despite sometimes-harsh realities of life: shortage of cash, two jobs, kids, and so on.

"I lucked out," Roberts said. "If it hadn't

Want to prevent or control diabetes? Advice from Vicki Lynn Hatfield, diabetes educator

1. If you are overweight, reduce your body weight by 5 to 7 percent (usually between 10 and 20 pounds). Once you get there, set the next 5 to 7 percent goal.

2. Increase physical activity to 150 minutes per week. By reducing weight and increasing exercise, you can reduce your risk of diabetes by 58 percent, according to Diabetes Prevention Program research.

3. Wear a pedometer and try to log 10,000 steps a day.

4. Cut sugary drinks such as soda and fruit-juice mixes from your diet. Drink more water.

5. Strive to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables daily. An apple is a serving, as is a cup of most vegetables. The vitamins, mineral and fiber in these foods help you feel full longer, decreasing cravings.

6. Watch portion sizes. Measure foods like cereals, chips or snacks to make sure you are not consuming extra servings.

7. No one should eat more than two fast-food meals per week. When you do eat fast food, pick healthier selections (a good resource is CalorieKing.com).

8. Fill your pantry and fridge with healthy food choices. Eliminate junk foods in your home, particularly those that you have trouble resisting.

9. Find a walking/exercise partner. You will be more motivated if you have someone to help you stay accountable.

10. Find ways to gradually spread healthier food choices and exercise habits to your entire family.

been for Vicki, I'd probably be in kidney failure now," he said.

He and Hatfield went over what he ate, how often he ate, his schedule, his physical activity. She had him keep a list. To get rid of his dizziness, shakiness and blurry vision, they planned specific ways he could change what he ate or when he ate and increase physical activity every day. They got his medicine adjusted.

Roberts went to Hatfield's group diabetes self-management classes at Williamson Memorial

SEE EVERETTE, 5C

DIALYSIS

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of need, compared with 24 in 2006. So the number of clinics has increased by at least 45 percent in the past six years.

Dialysis costs about \$77,000 per year per person, including medication, according to the National Kidney Foundation.

"It's a lot cheaper to prevent it," said Dr. Rebecca Schmidt, a West Virginia University professor who has been instrumental in making kidney screening and treatment available in West Virginia's rural areas.

West Virginia leads the nation in percent of people in kidney failure who start dialysis. The Elkins clinic's 40 patients alone cost about \$3 million a year.

Many dialysis patients are on disability after the bills wipe out their resources. Taxpayers pay a lot of the bill.

People on dialysis have advanced chronic kidney disease, called CKD. The disease can be reversed before the person reaches dialysis, but it gives the patient very few physical warnings, so a lot of people don't know they have it till it's too late, Schmidt said.

Many doctors do not know how to diagnose CKD, she said. "We need a statewide education campaign."

Several years ago, at Schmidt's instigation, state lawmakers required the state Department of Health and Human Resources to provide all doctors with CKD diagnosis training, so they could spot it before it was too late.

However, the Legislature provided no money to pay for the campaign. "The best we could do was put a CKD module on our online education program," said Gina Wood, diabetes program manager.

"It's not yet a lost cause," Schmidt said. "But it soon could be, if we don't get on the ball."

West Virginia leads the nation in diabetes and high blood pressure, the two main causes of kidney disease.

Why not laugh?

I'm not afraid to die.

Kittle, 77, remembers the Bel-

YOU REALLY DON'T WANT DIABETES

- Diabetics get heart disease two to four times more often than adults without diabetes.

- The stroke risk is two to four times higher.

- Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness among adults.

- Diabetes accounts for 44 percent of kidney disease.

- About 60 to 70 percent of diabetics have mild to severe nervous system damage.

- More than 60 percent of non-traumatic leg or foot amputations are due to diabetes.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control

ington diner she used to own. "People always had a good time at my diner, and I never let a person go away hungry," she said.

Now she can't walk by herself. Diabetes has wrecked the blood vessels in her legs.

She laughs a lot. "There's nothing I can do, so why not laugh?" she says. "I'm a Christian. I'm not afraid to die."

Kittle and her husband took in a disabled man when he was a child. Now that man helps care for her at home. Home health aides come every day. That costs too. Diabetes is not cheap.

She resisted dialysis till the last minute, when she was being hauled to the hospital in kidney failure. "When I knew I was going to die, that's when I started coming."

Wright, 63, the former Forest Service scientist, had to give up his job and most of his pastoring. "All I pastor now is my group at Huttonsville prison, and sometimes I'm so sick, I can't go to that."

He carries non-sugar candy in his pocket. "It's too late, but I try anyhow," he said.

'I was sitting all day.'

Hall said in November that, when he was young, his doctor told him, "Bill, there's diabetes



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

ABOVE: Linton Wright, of Elkins, was a Forest Service soil scientist before he lost his kidney function. "I wish I had taken better care earlier," he said.

RIGHT: Former Barbour County diner operator Lona Little, 77, loves to laugh, but diabetes has taken her sight in one eye, her kidneys and her ability to walk independently.



all through your family, so you'll probably get it. It isn't going to get you for a long time, so you might as well go ahead and have a good time.' So I took his advice on that."

"Bad advice," Weaner said.

Wright, on the other hand, knew he shouldn't be eating sugary things. "It didn't seem to hurt me," he said, "as long as I had a job out in the field, where I could be walking around all day and burn off the sugar. But soon as they pro-

moted me to a desk job and I was sitting all day, I started to go downhill. I was still eating the sugar, but I wasn't burning it off. It didn't balance anymore."

Kittle knew she had diabetes years before she did anything about it, she said. She says she never tried to eat a non-diabetic diet. "I was running a diner! I just figured God would decide when I'd die, and there was nothing I could do about that."

"If a patient believes it's going to happen, no matter what, why would they try to prevent it?" asked Dr. Frank Schwartz, director of the Appalachian Regional Health Institute Diabetes Center in Athens, Ohio.

"We have these cultural beliefs in Appalachia that, once you get diabetes, there's nothing that you can do to prevent losing your leg or going blind and your kidneys shutting down. That's the dominant story that's out there, that those

Diabetes is expensive

Individuals: The average diabetic, with no complications, pays about \$6,700 more per year in medical bills than the average nondiabetic.

State: West Virginians spend about \$1 billion a year on dealing with diabetes.

Nation: The nationwide cost of diabetes is \$174 billion.

Source: American Diabetes Association

Type 2 diabetes symptoms

Tell your medical provider if you have several of these characteristics:

- increased thirst and/or hunger

- frequent urination

- fatigue

- blurry vision

- unexplained weight loss

- sores that won't heal

- close relatives with diabetes

- darker skin on back of neck or armpits

Source: National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse

things are inevitable, once you get sugar."

"We've got to find a way to reverse the belief that there's nothing you can do," he said. "We're not going to make real headway till we do."

About 25 West Virginia health clinic and public health departments offer American Diabetes Association-approved diabetes coaching, aimed at preventing dialysis and other complications, but there are more programs. All 28 community health centers and most hospitals also have health-coaching programs.

Kittle, Hall and Wright never got solid, detailed advice, much less a coach.

"I wish I had had one," Wright said. "I want to see my grandkids grow up."

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