

Lifestyle diseases and coronavirus

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As the number of Covid-19 infections moves over 16,000, the health minister, Zweli Mkhize, has expressed concern about the huge risk group of South Africans suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity. In other words, comorbidities.

The words, "comorbidity" and "comorbid conditions", are common medical terms. Comorbidity refers to one or more diseases or conditions that occur along with another condition in the same person at the same time. Conditions considered comorbidities are often long-term or chronic conditions such as those mentioned by Zweli Mkhize.

"This worry," Mkhize said, "is born of the fact that these are the most common underlying medical conditions of those who have died of Covid-19 to date.

"The three that are currently emerging to be the most commonly associated comorbidities are hypertension (or high blood pressure), diabetes and obesity," he said. "In our country we have a very significant burden of all these three diseases. These risk factors are important to take into account because they are also serious factors when it comes to the conduct of the Covid-19 infection."

Two years ago the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Medical Research Council cautioned that chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are becoming the biggest threat to South Africans health. The Council described the problem of these non-communicable diseases as an "emerging epidemic".

Bonitas Medical Fund explains why you need to keep your finger on the pulse of your wellness numbers.

1. Weight and BMI

Almost 70% of women and 40% of men are overweight or obese.

Your Body Mass Indicator (BMI) calculator checks if you're at a healthy weight. Here's how to test, calculate yours by:

- Dividing your weight in kilogrammes (kg) by your height in metres (m).
- Then dividing the answer by your height again to get your BMI.

Good to know

Underweight	less than 18.5
Normal weight	18.5 - 24.9
Overweight	25 - 29.9
Obese	30 or greater

2. Diabetes

Over 4.6 million people in South Africa have diabetes.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a disease that occurs when your blood glucose, also called blood sugar, is too high. Blood glucose is your main source of energy and comes from the food you eat. Insulin, a hormone made by the pancreas, helps glucose from food get into your cells to be used for energy.

There are two main types of diabetes: Type 1 and Type 2. They are different conditions but are both serious and need to be treated and managed properly.

- *Type 1* occurs when the pancreas stops producing insulin. It usually starts very quickly and in younger people. If you have Type 1 diabetes you need insulin injections to survive as well as having a carefully balanced food intake and exercise programme.
- *Type 2* formerly called adult-onset or non-insulin-dependent diabetes, occurs when the pancreas makes too little insulin or your body can't use the insulin effectively. It usually develops in adulthood and is often caused by being overweight and not exercising. Approximately 85–90% of all people with diabetes are Type 2 and many people who have this condition are undiagnosed. This can result in serious damage to the delicate parts of the body and lead to blindness, heart attack/stroke, kidney failure, impotence and amputation so it's vital to be checked.

The tests

Test 1: The fasting blood glucose test – blood glucose is taken before you eat in the morning.

Good to know

Normal	3.9 to 5.5 mmols/l
Prediabetic or Impaired Glucose Tolerance	5.6 to 7.0 mmol/l
Diabetic	More than 7.0 mmol/l

Test 2: HbA1c test. The HbA1c levels determine your blood sugar control over time.

Good to know

Normal	Less than 6%
Prediabetic	6–6.4%
Diabetic	6.5% or more

3. Blood pressure

It's hard to believe but in South Africa more than one in three adults live with high blood pressure.

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of blood in your arteries – the blood vessels that carry blood away from your heart.

The blood pressures numbers mean the following: The first (or top) number is your systolic blood pressure. It is the highest level your blood pressure reaches when your heart beats. The bottom figure is your diastolic blood pressure and is the lowest pressure exerted as your heart relaxes between beats.

What is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure or hypertension is when blood pressure stays elevated over time. Hypertension is often known as the

'silent killer', since nearly 33% of people who have it, don't know it. The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have yours measured.

Good to know

	Range
Normal	120/80 to 129/84
Upper end of Normal	130/85 to 139/89
Mild hypertension	140/90 to 159/99
Moderate hypertension	160/100 to 179/109
Severe hypertension	More than 180/110

If your blood pressure is too high, it puts extra strain on your arteries (and your heart) and if it's not treated, hypertension can cause kidney failure, eye problems, heart disease and stroke.

Lee Callakoppen, Principal Officer of Bonitas Medical Fund, says, "When you consider that one in every three people in South African has high blood pressure and every eight minutes one South African has a heart attack, it makes sense that we have our blood pressure taken regularly either at your local pharmacy, your clinic or when you visit your GP."

He urges all South Africans to be proactive and take control of their health by getting an annual wellness test done. "Knowing your numbers will help you manage your health better and making sure your lifestyle diseases are under control, especially during these difficult times."

Bonitas has created Covid-19 Hub on their website to help ensure that South Africans are updated on the pandemic. In addition, the Fund has taken great strides to ensure that their members receive the care and support they need during this time by providing high-risk members with chronic conditions, such as diabetes and hypertension, with hand sanitiser. This will be delivered to them with the chronic medication.

Bonitas has also established a fast-reaction unit within their call centre to ensure that members concerned about contracting Covid-19 are able to get the advice and support they need. The fast-reaction unit has also proactively assisted members who have needed to self-isolate or tested positive. As an added bonus, the Fund's virtual care initiative, available on the Bonitas mobile app, allows members and non-members to consult with a GP from their home.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has placed the world in a vulnerable position. We are committed to acting in the best interests of our members at all times and are taking key measures to ensure they are supported during this time," Callakoppen said.

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