

ENDOCRINOLOGY: A Doctor's View

What one pediatric endocrinologist loves about her job, and why she urges her young patients with hormone disorders to make healthy lifestyle choices.



KANIKA SHANKER, MD,
COUNSELS A PATIENT.

For Kanika Shanker, MD, the decision to enter pediatric endocrinology was sparked by two things: her desire to help her mother manage her type 2 diabetes and her love of children.

The endocrine system is a network of glands that produces and releases hormones that regulate and control various body functions, including the ability to change calories into energy and to grow at a normal rate. Each gland has a specific purpose, so if one is not working correctly it can throw off the delicate balance of hormones, resulting in an endocrine disorder.

“One of the best things about endocrinology is that you’re not dealing with devastating diseases,” says Dr. Shanker, who practices at WellSpan Endocrinology locations in Franklin and Adams counties. “I can’t cure chronic conditions, but I can replace hormones that patients aren’t making and help them manage their conditions so they can become healthy and productive and enjoy a better quality of life.”

FAR-REACHING EFFECTS

Examples of conditions that endocrinologists treat include problems in adrenal, pituitary, and reproductive glands, which may cause or contribute to delayed or late puberty and growth; polycystic ovarian syndrome, a hormone imbalance that causes women and girls to skip menstrual periods and makes it harder for them to get pregnant; and thyroid disorders, which can lead to fatigue, depression, weight loss or gain, and even slow development.

In addition, Dr. Shanker provides care to girls with Turner syndrome, a genetic disorder that affects sexual and height development in females. At times, Dr. Shanker treats patients with gender dysphoria, giving them hormones to block the production of sexual hormones in the early stages of transitioning. Later, if they have fulfilled the criterion of Gender Identity Disorder, she provides trans-hormone therapy.

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DIABETES ON THE RISE

The most common endocrine disorder Dr. Shanker provides care for is diabetes, which, if left untreated, can lead to serious complications, such as heart disease and stroke. Technological advances have significantly improved diabetes care. “Things have changed very fast in this century,” says Dr. Shanker. For example, patients with diabetes now can use continuous glucose monitors, which means they no longer need to prick their fingers to check blood sugar levels.

Dr. Shanker says some parents mistakenly believe their child has developed type 1 diabetes because of bad eating habits. In fact, different factors, including genetics and some viruses, may contribute to type 1 diabetes. Another misconception she encounters is that type 2 diabetes only occurs in older adults. “Sometimes parents go into a state of shock, followed by denial, that their child can have type 2 diabetes at such an early age,” says Dr. Shanker. She treats

patients as young as 12 for this condition, which is increasingly common in young people because of rising obesity rates.

PROMOTING HEALTHY WEIGHT

When it comes to managing both types of diabetes, Dr. Shanker recommends eliminating sugary beverages and gradually increasing simple fitness activities like walking and cycling. Weight control is a key part of managing both types of diabetes. In fact, Dr. Shanker encourages all her patients to maintain a healthy body weight and recommends the use of apps to help them track their steps, calories, and blood sugar.

“It makes me happy,” she says, “when I do a great job of teaching patients and families about healthy lifestyle changes. My heart fills with joy when I can hand a report to families showing that hemoglobin A1c, a marker of diabetes control, has trended down and I see their sighs change to smiles.”

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