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Celebrity Diabetes

This week, the American Heart Association released their 2012 Heart Disease Statistics—didn't see it talked about anywhere. The Journal of the American Medical Association published the latest statistics on obesity in adults and children—nothing. But this past week, a Food Network celebrity chef revealed she has type 2 diabetes, and that's been all over the news all week. And might I add, not in a good way.

Paula Deen is known for her high-fat, sugar-laden Southern style of cooking. That she is a diabetic would not be a surprise to me—not because of what she cooks, but because of the degree she is overweight and what I would suspect is a sedentary lifestyle. However, it seems that everyone is enraged that she has been a diabetic for three years and didn't reveal it until now. Just about anyone who can get in front of a camera has been condemning her actions, or rather lack of them, until now.

The “until now” incenses people because she is going to be a spokesperson for a new diabetes drug. She is hypocritical, they say, because she knew she was a diabetic, and she kept cooking her unhealthy way to keep making money from books and her shows.

Let's all just settle down a little bit. You read the message because you usually like my take on things, but when you don't agree, you let me know it. So I'm going to give my opinion on this story, and next week I'll write about the new heart disease research—it's still the number one killer—and the new obesity statistics—we're still fat.

How I See It

I respect Paula Deen a great deal because she overcame agoraphobia. She didn't leave her home for a couple of years and when she did, it was to open a restaurant. She went on to host a TV show and become a well-known celebrity, which is really the opposite of what you'd expect from an agoraphobic. That's a tremendous achievement, because she could have stayed in her home collecting Social Security Disability all these years. She didn't and she deserves credit for that.

As for her cooking, I'm going to tell you what I've always told you. There are no foods, no ways of preparing food, that is verboten. The critical factor is how often you eat it and how much you eat at each sitting. It seems that she may have eaten more than she should have, but 70% of us are overweight including yours truly. Who hasn't overeaten? And we don't even have the excuse of food being our business! You don't have to be a nutritionist to know that the kind of foods she prepares on her shows isn't what you should eat every day. As viewers, we have a responsibility to assess what we're watching and be thoughtful in how we apply it to our own lives and diets.

Your medical history is your business and Paula's is hers as well; she deserves the chance to come to terms with this enormous change in her life and career at her own pace. Just because she's a celebrity doesn't give us the right to know any more than we know about anyone else's medical history—and it doesn't matter what any critic thinks.

Announcing that she's decided to become a spokesperson for a diabetic drug company may not have been the best way to come forward; timing is everything. You and I believe that we want to do things in as natural a way as possible: diet, exercise, and supplementation are the ways we believe in. But most people don't, or won't go to the trouble to change their lives, and medications are the only solution for millions. I don't like it and you probably don't either, but we have to be realistic. Until we get a diabetes-education program that actually works in this

country, should we let people go blind, lose limbs, and go on dialysis? I don't think so. It doesn't make sense either morally or financially.

The Bottom Line

Paula Deen is a celebrity and with that goes a public perception of responsibility. But she also has a right to privacy and a right to make mistakes. She's overcome a great deal, and this is another challenge she will have to overcome. I wish her success. She can have an impact on type 2 diabetics; we'll just have to give her some time and wait to see what type of impact that will be, because it could be very influential if she focuses on healthier cooking and lifestyle changes in addition to medication. We already know she's changed her lifestyle; besides changing her recipes and going for long walks with her husband, she said she hasn't had sweet tea in three years, and that's a big change for any true Southerner. I'm hoping she isn't driven back into her home. We all lose if that happens.

One more thing: if you seek celebrity status in whatever field you're in, make sure you're prepared for the constant scrutiny. The buzzards are circling. They're always circling.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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