



CDC Connects

# Lifestyle Change as a Diabetes Educator

May 8, 2023

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Betsy teaches DSMES services in Spanish and via live-stream online classes to increase access to diabetes care in her community.

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## Diabetes On The Rise

Over 96 million Americans have prediabetes and over 37 million are living with diabetes. Diabetes can lead to health complications like heart disease, nerve damage, vision loss, and kidney disease. The rate of diabetes in the US continues to grow, including for CDC employees. Betsy Rodriguez has a unique perspective on this as a CDC expert on diabetes, AND a person living with type 2 diabetes. Her experience, both professional and personal, sheds light on the importance of healthy lifestyle changes to prevent, delay, or manage diabetes.

Betsy is a senior public health advisor with the Division of Diabetes Translation (DDT). She's a nurse and diabetes educator by training, who has devoted 30 years to DDT. Betsy has close family members with both type 1 and type 2 diabetes. "For me, diabetes is not just work."

### **Betsy's Story**

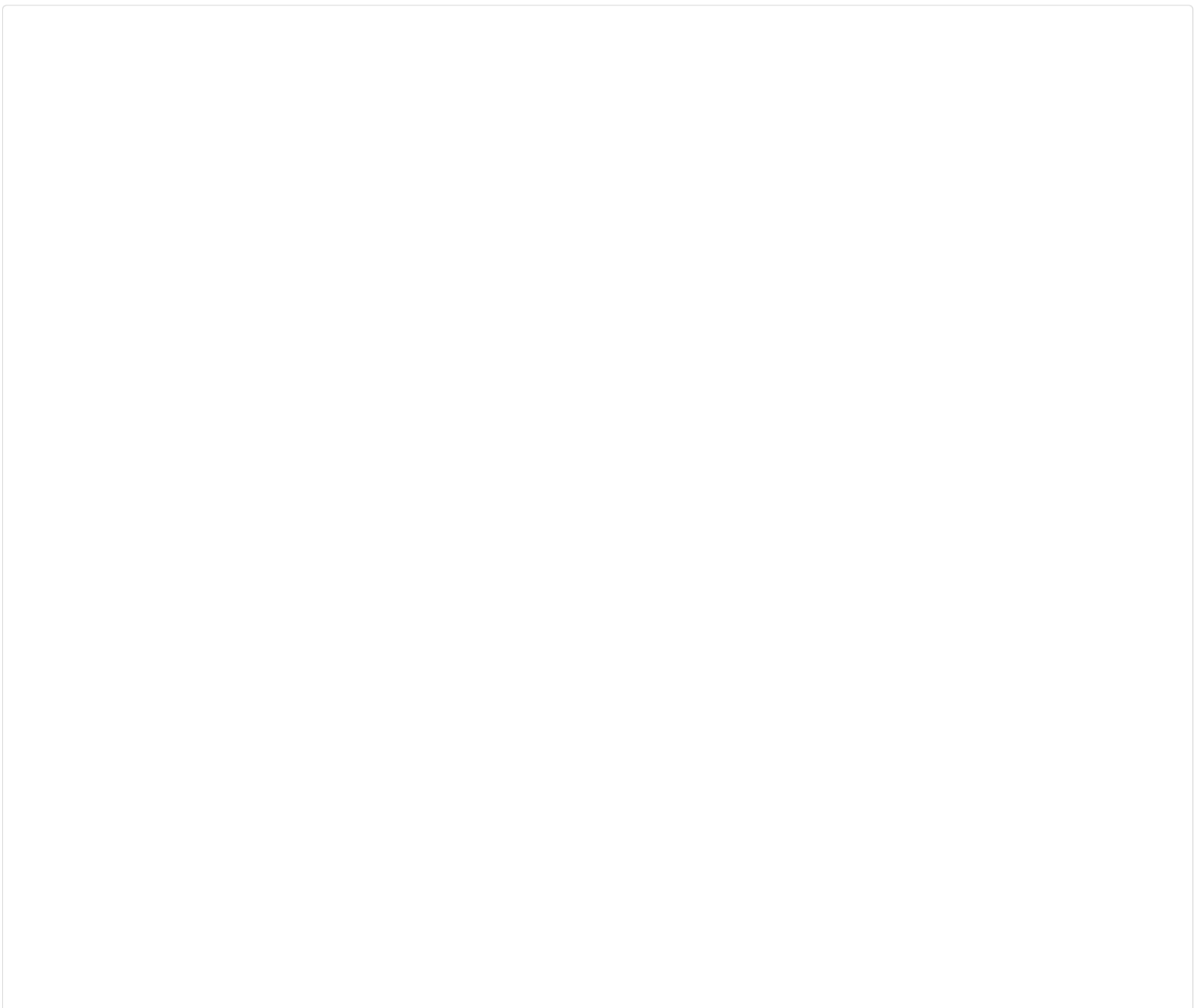
Decades ago, when Betsy came to Atlanta from Puerto Rico, she weighed 130 pounds. Over time, between work and raising a family, Betsy found it hard to eat healthfully and be active, and her weight crept up. "Suddenly," she says, "I opened my eyes and I weighed 315 pounds."

Like her mother and brother, Betsy developed type 2 diabetes. She was exhausted and in chronic pain from a number of health problems. Eventually, Betsy's health problems worsened until she was unable to walk and needed a wheelchair. It bothered her deeply that she was teaching people how to take care of themselves, but she couldn't seem to manage it for herself.

Betsy reached her breaking point in summer 2019. She was scheduled to speak at a conference and found herself on presentation day alone in her hotel room, unable to put her shoes on. Without any other options and only 15 minutes before her presentation, Betsy left her hotel room in her wheelchair with shoes in hand and asked a woman in the hallway for help. She was able to do her presentation, but she says it was a low point for her.

Betsy realized she had to do something. As soon as she got home, she called her health insurance provider to find resources for help. She was referred to a dietitian she describes as "a true blessing" in her life. This dietitian had compassion and experience working with people with obesity. She understood right away the challenges Betsy was facing.

### **Making Lifestyle Changes**





Betsy is now physically active every day. She does weightlifting and cardiovascular exercises, and is looking forward to learning Tai Chi and Pilates.

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Although Betsy is a diabetes prevention and management expert, she recognizes that she couldn't have succeeded by herself. "Knowledge doesn't change behavior. I had the knowledge, but I didn't have the skills, the support, the self-motivation. I didn't have the self-efficacy that is needed to make changes. Now I have all those things."

Betsy started right away with telehealth sessions with her dietitian and began with small steps to improve her health. "I remember my first goal was just to increase the amount of water I drank," she says. "My second goal was to use an app to record what I was eating on a day-to-day basis."

Gradually, she made more changes like switching to avocado oil and cutting out unhealthy snacks and added sugars. Despite her years of diabetes educator experience, Betsy learned how to have a healthier relationship with food by adopting sustainable behaviors. Rather than following a restrictive diet, she still enjoys her traditional foods in moderation.

Betsy also started moving more. At first, she could only move her arms, neck, and shoulders, so she did exercises in her chair. Eventually, she added leg exercises, and then standing, and then walking short distances. “The first time, I was able to walk only 3 houses away from mine. Now, I’m walking my entire neighborhood.” At this point, Betsy started going to the gym with her doctor’s clearance. With the help of a trainer, Betsy worked her way up to the routine she maintains today, including cardio and weight training.

In about 12 months Betsy lost 115 pounds and has lost even more since then. She no longer needs medications for osteoporosis, hypertension, or type 2 diabetes. The swelling in her feet, insomnia, acid reflux, migraines, and mood swings have all gone away as well.

Betsy comes from a big Latino family that celebrates being together with traditional foods. It can be hard to manage diabetes in the face of so many carbohydrate options like bread, fried tostones (plantains), rice, beans, and desserts. She’s learned to choose a small portion of carbs with meat and veggies and asks herself, “Are you here to eat, or are you here to be with your friends and celebrate?”

### Advice From an Expert

Betsy’s advice to others hoping to make healthy changes: “you have to take your attention away from the scale,” she says. Betsy focuses on how she feels having more energy instead of weight loss results. She also recommends seeking help and support when you need it.

Betsy has new insight when it comes to diabetes education. She has been revamping diabetes curricula and toolkits for CDC’s [National Diabetes Prevention Program](#) (National DPP) lifestyle change program and for [diabetes self-management education and support](#) (DSMES) services. With her unique perspective as a learner and an educator, Betsy develops resources for people with diabetes and for community health workers who lead trainings, combining science-based interventions with a human touch. Betsy leads DSMES classes in person and online throughout her community where she shares her personal experience. She tells people, “I know how you feel. I know how hard it is. But I also know it’s doable.”

If you have prediabetes, the National DPP lifestyle change program can help you prevent or delay type 2 diabetes. [Find a program](#) near you, or CDC’s Division of Diabetes Translation offers the National DPP lifestyle change program to employees for free once a year, where Betsy is a guest speaker. Keep an eye out in CDC Today or NCCDPHP Today for the next cohort if you’re interested in participating. You can also take the [1-minute prediabetes risk test](#) [↗](#) today to know where you stand.

DSMES is also available to help you learn practical skills and healthy coping if you’re living with diabetes. Your doctor may refer you to a specific program, or you can visit the [Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists](#) [↗](#) or the [American Diabetes Association](#) [↗](#) to find a program near you. Most insurance plans cover these programs and services. To get started with the skills you’ll learn in DSMES, watch [Diabetes Kickstart videos](#).

This *CDC Connects* Feature Story by Emily Kaplan, MPH

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Betsy Rodriguez

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Last Reviewed: May 8, 2023