Middle aged diabetics can die six years earlier

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Having diabetes in mid-life may reduce a person’s life expectancy by an average of six years, according to a large, multinational study coordinated by the University of Cambridge.

Diabetes is already known to approximately double the risk of heart attacks and strokes, but these new findings show that people with type 2 diabetes are also at greater risk of dying from several other diseases, including cancer and infection.

The research, funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC), highlights the importance of preventing diabetes, which affects more than 2.5 million people in the UK and nearly 285 million people worldwide.

Scientists from the Emerging Risk Factors Collaboration – a consortium led by Professor John Danesh, Head of the Department of Public Health and Primary Care – analysed data on 820,900 people, each of whom was monitored for about a decade.

Even after accounting for other major risk factors such as age, sex, obesity and smoking, the researchers found that people with diabetes are at increased risk of death from several common cancers, infections, mental disorders, and liver, digestive, kidney and lung diseases.

About 60 per cent of the reduced life expectancy in people with diabetes is attributable to blood vessel diseases (such as heart attacks and strokes), with the remainder attributable to these other conditions.

Only a small part of these associations are explained by obesity, blood pressure, or high levels of fat in the blood – conditions which often co-exist with diabetes.

Professor John Danesh, Principal Investigator of the study, from the University of Cambridge, said: “These findings broaden and intensify the need for efforts to prevent and understand diabetes.

In particular, the findings highlight the need for more detailed study of whether treatments against diabetes may also be relevant to lowering the risk of a range of diseases, including common cancers.”

The collaborative study, which involved over 250 scientists from 25 countries, also suggests that people with diabetes may be at increased risk of death from intentional self-harm – a finding which the scientists say requires further study, including investigation of the possible link between diabetes and depression.

The study, which was funded by the MRC, British Heart Foundation and Pfizer, is published in the New England Journal of Medicine yesterday (02 March).