Confronting America’s diabetes challenge
One community at a time

A touch of sugar

presented by Merck directed by Ani Simon-Kennedy
discussion guide

downloadable materials available on americadiabeteschallenge.com:
Infographics
Trailer Video
Official Poster Image
Official Stills

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More than 30 million Americans have diabetes – that’s about 1 in 8 adults – and 90 to 95% of them have type 2 diabetes. A Touch of Sugar dives into the diabetes healthcare challenge that affects every community in the United States, told through the voices of people united in their struggle with this chronic disease. Diabetes management doesn’t occur in isolation. These stories bring to life the emotional challenges, social factors and public perceptions that have a significant impact but go unnoticed far too often.

Created in collaboration with Merck and directed by Ani Simon-Kennedy, the film attests to the resiliency of the human spirit and challenges the national perception of life with type 2 diabetes. Interviews with patients and their loved ones, as well as doctors, advocates and thought leaders in the space, explore the larger diabetes ecosystem at work and help to reinforce type 2 diabetes as an urgent public health issue that cannot be ignored, especially among underserved populations.

As Shenekqual prepares for her wedding, Stewart heads to Capitol Hill, Niurka provides for her family and Susie searches for the support she needs, A Touch of Sugar sheds light on how we must fight the stigma associated with the disease and confront this challenge – one patient and one community at a time.
If we want to tackle the diabetes challenge in America, we need to come together and make changes to the way we view, support, treat and advocate for people living with the disease.

Through the film we hope to:

- Inspire people living with type 2 diabetes, their loved ones and their doctors to work together to make progress in managing the disease
- Raise awareness of how type 2 diabetes disproportionately affects at-risk groups, particularly the Hispanic and African-American communities
- Shed light on the seriousness of the disease and how many social conditions and factors can significantly impact type 2 diabetes management
- Ignite critical conversations around health disparities, barriers to treatment, access to care and the need for culturally relevant management tools to better support people with type 2 diabetes
- Educate people living with type 2 diabetes and their loved ones about the importance of A1C (average blood sugar over the past two to three months) goal attainment and individualized treatment plans
- Challenge the stigma associated with the disease and encourage people across the country to advocate on behalf of people with diabetes in their local communities

Patients
Living with type 2 diabetes has its challenges, but it can be managed, especially with a solid support system. Work with a doctor to develop an individualized treatment plan that can help you reach a personal A1C goal and reduce the risk of serious complications. Be sure to ask questions and speak up if you believe that something isn’t working for you.

Caregivers
Ask your loved one’s healthcare provider where you can learn more about type 2 diabetes, such as books, support groups and online resources/forums so that you can educate yourself. Being a good listener and making lifestyle changes together also can go a long way in helping to support your loved one’s treatment plan.

Healthcare Professionals
Consider health literacy, socio-economic factors, cultural background, geographic location and personal lifestyle when treating people with type 2 diabetes.

Policymakers & Leaders
Build coalitions, and develop policies and best practices at both the national and local levels to expand diabetes research, support action plans, provide important resources/programming and help reduce health disparities.

Advocates
Take action at the federal, state and local levels to improve access to diabetes care, address the social determinants of health and rally support for people with diabetes.

General Public
Start a dialogue about type 2 diabetes within your community to help end the stigma associated with the disease, and rally support by participating in local education and awareness events.
Growing up, type 2 diabetes was never openly discussed in my family. As a child, I remember my grandfather having kidney problems, and that the word “sugar” would, for some reason, come up in discussion. By the time I was a teenager, I knew “sugar” meant blood sugar – he would monitor and keep it in check to control his diabetes.

I never gave diabetes much more thought, despite knowing it ran in my family. It wasn’t until ten years ago, when my mother was diagnosed with prediabetes, and eventually type 2 diabetes, that I learned what this chronic condition is, how it is treated and what can happen over time if ignored. What I didn’t realize at the time is how widespread the disease is.

My primary goal with A Touch of Sugar is to powerfully expose something that is, in many ways, hiding in plain sight. Through unscripted interviews with people of different backgrounds – all sharing the common experience of being affected by type 2 diabetes – I hope to raise awareness of the disease, challenge the stigma associated it and inspire people to confront this challenge.

At the core of my work as a filmmaker is a focus on social issues and the common fabric of the human experience. I’m drawn to share the stories of people whose paths I would never have had the chance to cross otherwise. My hope is that A Touch of Sugar will contest the status quo and result in positive change for the millions of Americans affected by type 2 diabetes – no matter their race, class, economic status, gender or ethnicity. A Touch of Sugar is a wake-up call.

– Ani Simon-Kennedy

director’s statement

At Merck, patients are at the center of everything we do, but to truly take on the type 2 diabetes challenge, we need to go beyond the individual. Although this disease is a result of a combination of genetics, lifestyle and environment, there are steps that we can take together to help reduce the impact of the disease at the community level. By working to eliminate health disparities and tackling the socio-economic factors affecting disease management, we can make a real difference in reducing the impact of diabetes one neighborhood at a time.

A Touch of Sugar sheds light on life with type 2 diabetes and cultivates the empathy needed to help decrease the stigma associated with the disease by putting a spotlight on the real people and communities affected by it firsthand. In the film, we see that people throughout the United States are facing common challenges while managing their type 2 diabetes, including sticking to a treatment plan, eating healthy, having access to resources and proper care and coping with the disease. With this documentary, we hope to increase awareness, spark change and ultimately, confront America’s type 2 diabetes challenge head on.

– Conrod Kelly, Executive Producer on behalf of Merck

purpose statement
Susie Katona
Susie was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes only eight years ago and is one of the 23 million Americans living in food deserts across the country. Her rural community doesn’t offer her the resources and medical assistance she needs to properly manage her disease. Despite her challenges, she has a positive outlook and wants to do everything she can to help reduce her risk of complications, so she can be around for her close-knit family.

Stewart Perry
Stewart is a passionate type 2 diabetes activist who serves on numerous boards and has been living with the disease for 28 years. Growing up in Appalachia, he has seen how certain lifestyle habits, along with lack of access to care and information, has contributed to his family’s struggle with the disease. A recent health setback reinforced his drive to speak out against the stigma associated with type 2 diabetes and lobby on behalf of patients whose needs demand attention.

Shenekqual Robertson-Carter
Shenekqual has been living with type 2 diabetes for more than 15 years and has built a career around educating others about the disease. Her son lives with type 1 diabetes, and it was his diagnosis that finally gave her the wake-up call she so desperately needed.

Niurka Rodriguez
Niurka was diagnosed with prediabetes while pregnant with her son, and although she has a strong family history of the disease, she never thought she would develop type 2 diabetes. She has made great strides in managing the disease, while relying on her family and faith for support.

Tracey Brown
Tracey is a type 2 diabetes patient herself, and the CEO of the American Diabetes Association – a leading national voluntary health organization and a global authority on diabetes.

Jane L. Delgado, PhD, MS
Dr. Delgado is the President and CEO of the National Alliance for Hispanic Health, an organization that works to achieve the best health for all by incorporating the best of science, culture and community.

William Polonsky, PhD, CDE
Dr. Polonsky is the President and Founder of the Behavioral Diabetes Institute, an organization dedicated to addressing the psychological needs of people with diabetes.

Elena Rios, MD, MSPH, FACP
Dr. Rios is the President and CEO of the National Hispanic Medical Association, an organization devoted to improving the health of Hispanics in the United States.

Additional Contributors
Nelea Absher | Gevon Anderson | Dana Gray | Greg Hill
Max Lamarque | Tamara McGregor, MD | Judy Perry
Joan “Honey” Pipkins | David Richer | Lawrence T. Smith | Phoebe Stewart | Rachel Williams
"When they told me I was diabetic, I didn’t take it real seriously. I just knew what they had said. He gave me a pamphlet. And that was it."
– Susie Katona

“It never passed my mind that I’m going to have diabetes even though I knew that it was in my genes because of my family history. I never thought that I would be diagnosed with diabetes.”
– Niurka Rodriguez

“There is a semblance of shame that is forced upon people with diabetes because the world thinks they chose to do this. I didn’t choose to get diabetes.”
– Stewart Perry

“Type 2 diabetes is one of the few diseases we have in this country where both the lay public and healthcare professionals often think it’s okay to blame people for getting this disease. That’s crazy, and unfair and insulting.”
– Dr. William Polonsky

“It’s so important for patients to have access to doctors, and that’s the biggest challenge for Hispanics. They live in pockets called ‘medically underserved areas’ in this country. The next challenge is when patients do have access to doctors, they don’t have doctors that understand their culture and their environment.”
– Dr. Elena Rios

“Some people don’t have access to the healthier food options in their community...When we talk about the way we eat, we also have to force our grocery stores to carry fresh fruits and vegetables.”
– Crowdmember in Shenekqual Robertson-Carter’s class

"Life is not over. It’s not over. Get a good support system. You are not alone and this is not the end of your life.”
– Shenekqual Robertson-Carter

“Talk about living with diabetes, because I think we need everyone to start to awaken the world. Everybody’s voice counts and matters. Don’t be ashamed, walk proudly, and you can manage it – you can thrive.”
– Tracey Brown

More than 30 million Americans have diabetes – that’s about 1 in 8 adults. 90-95% of them have type 2 diabetes.

Based on data projected in 2015, if current trends continue, by 2030 the prevalence of diabetes in the United States will increase by 54%.

Hispanic/Latino adults in the United States are nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as non-Hispanic white adults.

Nearly 12% of all African-American adults have been diagnosed with diabetes, and this community is more likely than non-Hispanic whites to experience serious long-term health problems over time from the disease.

Health literacy is the capacity to obtain and understand basic information needed to make appropriate health decisions, and low health literacy affects about 1 in 3 American adults.

More than 23 million Americans live in food deserts – low-income communities without ready access to healthy and affordable food.
Patients
• What does the documentary’s title, A Touch of Sugar, mean to you?
• Do you know what A1C is and have you set a personal goal with your doctor?
• What type of support could help you manage your type 2 diabetes better?
• What are some of the biggest successes and challenges you’ve experienced living with type 2 diabetes?
• What do you wish others knew about life with type 2 diabetes?

Caregivers
• What are some lifestyle changes you can implement with your loved one?
• Do you have the information and resources you need to help care for your loved one?
• What are some ways you can help facilitate better communication between your loved one and their healthcare provider?
• What are the biggest challenges you face in caring for your loved one?

Healthcare Professionals
• How can you help your patients stay motivated and follow their treatment plans knowing type 2 diabetes is a progressive disease?
• What are some of the barriers you face when caring for your patients with type 2 diabetes?
• What do you see as the biggest contributing factors to the type 2 diabetes challenge?
• Do you consider health literacy, cultural background and personal lifestyle when treating your patients?
• What do you hope for the future of type 2 diabetes and for your patients?

Policymakers & Leaders
• What are your biggest concerns around the personal, social and economic impact of type 2 diabetes?
• What types of policies can be implemented to better support underserved type 2 diabetes patient populations in the U.S.?
• How can type 2 diabetes be reinforced as an urgent public health issue?
• What kinds of laws and regulations can be put in place to influence the socio-economic factors that impact disease management?

Advocates
• What steps have you taken at the federal, state and local levels to help support those affected by the growing diabetes challenge?
• What are some ways you can work to raise awareness of the social determinants of health to ensure they are recognized and discussed as barriers to optimal diabetes care?
• How can the government, healthcare providers, loved ones and the general public better support the type 2 diabetes community?
• What can be done to reduce the stigma associated with type 2 diabetes?

General Public
• What are some creative ways you can start a dialogue about type 2 diabetes within your community?
• Does your community offer diabetes services, programming and/or support groups?
• Do your supermarkets carry healthy and affordable food options? Are there safe public spaces where people can be active and exercise?
• Who are the influential leaders and organizations in your community that can help you take action, bring about change and raise awareness?
For information about A Touch of Sugar, type 2 diabetes management tips, educational resources in English and Spanish and healthy recipe ideas:
http://www.AmericasDiabetesChallenge.com

Find life-hacks and practical advice to help manage type 2 diabetes:
https://how2type2.com

Learn more about diabetes and support those affected by this disease:
http://www.diabetes.org

Learn more about a community of healthcare professionals dedicated to improving healthcare for Hispanics:
http://www.nhmamd.org

Provides information to people with diabetes, prediabetes and obesity:
https://www.diatribe.org/foundation

Access education and support services for women with all types of diabetes:
https://www.diabetessisters.org

For advice on how to help improve the health and wellbeing of Hispanics:
- Visit: https://www.healthyamericas.org/diabetes
- Call: The National Alliance for Hispanic Health’s Su Familia helpline at 1-866-783-2645

For guidance on how to reduce language barriers and improve cultural competency in healthcare:
https://www.thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov

To view food access data and supermarket accessibility for specific locations in the United States:
https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas

Get additional information about the prevention, prevalence and management of diabetes in the United States:
https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/home/index.html