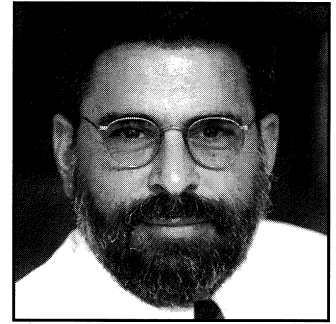


# Bears & Health

## Bears and Another Epidemic: Diabetes



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At the end of August, I did the last of the summer's three bear weekends at Hillside campgrounds in Gibson, Pennsylvania. You know Hillside. It's the one where clothing is optional and the emblem is a pine tree and a rabbit. Or is it a bunny? The weather had been terrible all summer but this weekend it was glorious and there were hundreds of magnificent bears, even some real ones coming down the mountains in search of food. In the pool, where mostly nude bears were glomming onto each other like amoeba, I spotted a friend who I'll call B (as in Butt). B's beefy sexiness, I learned as I got to know him better, has come with a price. He has diabetes, the kind you get from being overweight. When his weight is down a bit, his blood sugars are either normal or slightly elevated. When they're up, he takes a pill. One thing B is very happy about is his doctor, who doesn't happen to be gay (the gay ones I referred him to in Philly never returned his calls), and who B says takes time to explain stuff and gently coaxes him about his diet, exercise and medication. Our little reunion in the pool was punctuated by lots of cruising, of course - attention deficit disorder city! - and in fact one of those I was cruising turned out to be B's buddy who by coincidence, B explained, had himself just been diagnosed with diabetes earlier that week. B was concerned that his friend seemed to be depressed and not dealing with it. Apparently, the fella's doctor had simply unloaded the diagnosis and walked away, leaving it to his patient to educate himself about this complicated, serious condition that the first fall issue of *Newsweek* in its cover story called "a silent epidemic" affecting 16 million Americans, including "an alarming number of people in their 30's" ("An American Epidemic: Diabetes," *Newsweek*, 9/4/00; check it out on the net). "Scientific research," the article says, shows a "persistent explosion" of cases, "especially among those in their prime."

What the *Newsweek* feature is saying is that America, mirroring its financial prosperity, is literally growing fatter, especially its men, and the epidemic increase in cases of diabetes is a real measure of that trend. To what extent are our prime beef bears simply a reflection of this? Alternatively, are we the trendsetters here, as gay men have been in other areas of fashion and culture, especially as they relate to sex (e.g., the pierced ears, nipples, Prince Alberts, shaved heads, tats, etc.). In other words, to what extent is the flourishing of bear culture influencing the greater visibility and acknowledged sensuality of the heavysset? (In addition to your medical questions, if anyone has pix of Chris Penn, or his phone number or screen name, please contact me.)

...Where were we? Oh, yes, diabetes. Since my space for this column has now almost run out, I think you, I agree that the remainder of this discussion should be about the medical aspects of this disease. OK. If you are physically bearish, as opposed to being an otter or wolf, chances are you are overweight to an extent that puts you at real risk for developing diabetes, even in your twenties. The risk increases substantially as you enter your thirties, especially if there is a family history of the disease. By the time you are in your fifties, if you are seriously overweight, the risk of developing diabetes is, well, enormous. So what do you look for? Because you may have it without any noticeable symptoms at first, you should make it a point to have a routine physical exam and blood work, which includes a blood sugar level, at least annually. As you enter your thirties, this is something you should be doing anyway, even if you're not overweight. In addition to having an elevated blood sugar, common symptoms of diabetes include: frequent urination (if you are getting up more than twice during the night to pee, diabetes could be the reason, but other causes include prostate enlargement and sleep apnea); excessive thirst

and/or hunger; blurred vision; tingling and/or numbness in the fingers and especially in the feet and toes; frequent skin infections; and slow healing of cuts and bruises. Another not uncommon complication of diabetes is impotence.

As for the seriousness of the disease and its many complications, I wish I could tell you it's not to worry, and that beefcake is worth it (like you, that's what does it for me), but diabetes is all too often a progressive disease that can have devastating consequences, including advanced heart disease with greater risk for heart attack and stroke, blindness, the loss of one's legs and kidney failure. That's the bad news. The good news is that there are medications to treat it and to treat, delay or even prevent its complications, and research shows that, although there is no guarantee, the greater you control your blood sugar with diet and medication and the more you exercise, the less likely you are to have complications. Let me make it clear that I'm not saying you and I can't or shouldn't opt for beefcake in others and ourselves. What I am saying, however, is that our decision to do so should be informed and sober.

My physically bearish life partner, incidentally, has diabetes, which runs in his family, as it does in mine (his father, my aunt and uncle; it's common among Jews, but if you are overweight, don't expect it to discriminate in favor of your ethnicity). His father eventually lost both his legs and the great love of my life now has arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease, for which he's had to have several angioplasties. So, just as the personal is political, as we say, so are bears and health.