



Phyllisa Deroze // Dre Johnson, the protagonist on the television series *Black-ish*, is diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in season four. While the ninth episode, entitled “Sugar Daddy,” is another example of the award-winning sitcom’s exceptional ability to overlap comedy with serious topics relevant to African Americans, such as Juneteenth and the Black Lives Matter Movement, this episode stands out. It chronicles Dre’s diagnosis of type 2 diabetes while also highlighting racial disparities within the diabetes epidemic, revealing socio-economic and environmental risk factors, and discrediting harmful myths about curing type 2 diabetes.

Most reputable organizations that provide statistical information about diabetes, such as the CDC and the American Diabetes Association, list “being African American” as a standalone risk factor for type 2 diabetes.[1][2] Without context, stating race as a singular risk factor can be problematic, especially for African Americans who are newly diagnosed and looking for educational information about diabetes. The vague information could foster a sense of hopelessness as it has fatalistic overtones. I was impressed that the show provided insightful, contextual counter narratives to deepen viewers’ knowledge about risk factors among African Americans that contribute to the alarming rate of diagnoses. Before the opening credits emerge, cartoon illustrations bring Dre’s voiceover to life as he avoids listing race as a lone culprit by introducing the show with the words,

*“...But as easy as we seem to have it, we’re twice as likely to get diagnosed with diabetes. While genetics are a factor, diabetes has also been linked to obesity, poor diet, and inactivity. But don’t get it twisted, it’s not all our fault. For a lot of us it’s hard to be fit living in a food desert with no decent healthcare or gyms. And let’s be honest, who has time to exercise when you’re working two jobs to make ends meet. Even if you can make time, it’s dicey because if someone sees you running in the hood, they’ll give you something to run from. Despite our best efforts, ‘the sugars’ is super common with black folks. 1.3 million Black Americans are currently living with it today. In fact, it’s so common that I already have it.”[3]*

By saying “don’t get it twisted,” Dre inserts a counter narrative to the status quo that recognizes racial factors must be discussed in parallel with poverty and a culture of survival. Researchers have

noted that African Americans in poorer neighborhoods have an increased number of health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, that are directly related to the lack of access to fresh food, an overabundance of fast-food restaurants, and the lack of sleep.[4][5]

Additionally, there are many myths populating within the mainstream that claim type 2 diabetes can be cured through diet, or they use slippery slope language that is highly suggestive of that claim. For example, books with titles like *Reverse Type 2 Diabetes FOREVER: What Your Doctor Won't Tell You About Reversing Type 2 Diabetes And How You Can Come Off Your Medications Once And For All* are easily available and can confuse newly diagnosed people in thinking that diabetes is not a chronic illness. The show dispels this cure myth by showing Dre's journey of moving from denial to acceptance of his diagnosis. At the doctor's visit where Dre is initially diagnosed, he denies having all the classic symptoms of hyperglycemia (thirst, urination, hunger, fatigue, and erectile dysfunction for men). Later when he is standing in the kitchen on the verge of tears with a lancet in his hand preparing to check his blood sugar, he tells his father, "Pops," played by the actor Laurence Fishburne, "I don't want to prick my finger." Pop quickly responds, "You don't need to be bothered with this mess. Let me show you something." Pops proceeds to show him a film populated with testimonials from people who had various illnesses and are now living miraculous lives after being cured. Dre asks, "Why didn't my doctor tell me about this?" Pop replies, "Because there's no money in the cure, only in the treatment." For clarification, Dre furthers, "You saying I can cure this?" Pop answers, "I'm not saying it, the documentary is saying it and a 56% Rotten Tomato score doesn't lie." Convinced, Dre embarks upon a journey of curing his diabetes by fasting, detoxing, going to sweat lodges, reading wellness blogs, getting colonics, and hiring an online certified health coach. Many Hollywood stars and entertainers, including Anthony Anderson (the real-life Dre), who live with type 2 diabetes, have famously turned to strict dietary changes such as veganism to help manage their type 2 diabetes.[6] In fact, Chaka Khan famously attributes a two-month liquid diet followed by veganism for her 60-pound weight loss and ability to manage diabetes without medication.[7] Although there is nothing wrong with dietary changes including veganism, issues arise when they are associated with claims of being the cure for type 2 diabetes. Obviously, Dre fails to cure his diabetes. He faints at a work function and this, in addition to a dream he has where he died from diabetes complications and Rick Fox replaces him as husband and father, serves as a wake-up call. He finally starts taking diabetes seriously.

By the end of the episode, we witness Dre move from denial to acceptance. He understands that diabetes is a manageable condition. He asks his wife, Rainbow (played by Tracee Ellis Ross), to assist him with checking his blood sugar. In more ways than one, the episode drives home the point that "Diabetes doesn't have to be a death sentence." While there remains room for continued discussions about type 2 diabetes in minority populations, *Black-ish* was able to combat many myths, maintain its comedic tone, educate its viewers, and give hope to people who are diagnosed and may need a laugh at such a trying time in their lives.

[1] <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/basics/risk-factors.html>

[2] <https://www.diabetes.org/diabetes-risk>

[3] "Sugar Daddy." *Black-ish*, written by Kenya Barris, Peter Saji, Scott Weinger, Kenny Smith, Jr., created by Kenya Barris, American Broadcast Company, 12 Dec. 2017.

[4] Reitzel, Lorraine R., Hiroe Okamoto, Daphne C. Hernandez, et al. "The Build Food Environment and Dietary Intake among African-American Adults." *American Journal Health Behavior*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2016, pp. 3-11.

[5] Chaput, J-P, Després, J-P, Bouchard, C., and Tremblay, A. "Association of sleep duration with type 2 diabetes and impaired glucose tolerance." *Diabetologia*, vol. 50, no. 11, 2007, pp. 2298-304

[6] <https://www.everydayhealth.com/type-2-diabetes/diet/blackish-star-anthony-anderson-on-his-diabetes-diagnosis-regaining-control-his-health/>

[7] <https://blackdoctor.org/9285/chaka-khan-drops-60-pounds/>