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### Perceptions And Practices Of Indigenous Populations About Diabetes In Guatemala

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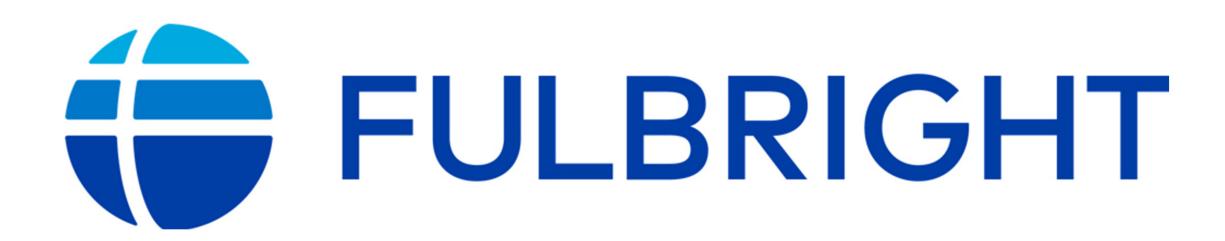
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# Diabetes in Guatemala: Perceptions and Practices of Indigenous Populations



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# **Abstract**

Diabetes is becoming a common disease among indigenous populations in Guatemala. They perceive diabetes not only as a medical disease, but also a condition linked to emotions. They say they have total confidence in the official health system, but in practice they rely on the ancestral Mayan knowledge of the healers and spiritual guides to complement biomedical treatments

# Introduction

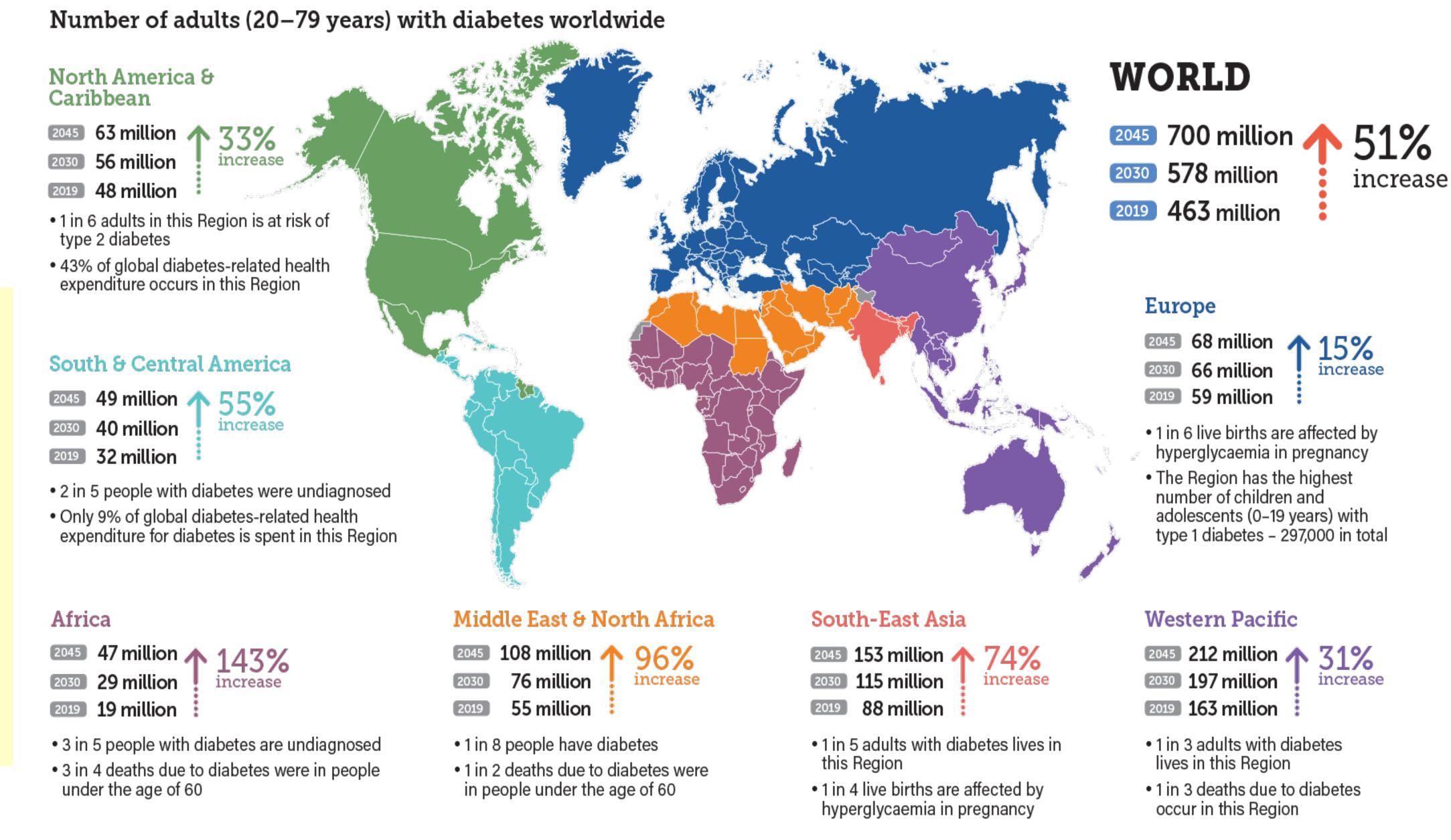
- Diabetes is a **global epidemic**. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 346 million people have diabetes, and that just in Latin America the number of people could rise from 25 million to 40 million by 2030 (Pérez et al, 2013).
- Among indigenous populations around the world, the percentage of those affected with diabetes reaches up to 50% (Pérez et al, 2013).
- In Guatemala, extreme poverty, low resources for primary health care, little physical activity, and poor diet make diabetes one of the main causes of mortality (Rosales, 2015).

# **Research Question**

What are the perceptions, lifestyles and practices of the indigenous population of Guatemala regarding diabetes?



Photograph 1. Healer sharing his knowledge about plants and herbs to treat diabetes. Taken by: Liesl Cohn



Graphic 1. Diabetes worldwide. Source: International Diabetes Federation. Web site: https://diabetesatlas.org/data/en/world/

# Methodology

- Qualitative methodology.
- Ethnographic method.
- Fieldwork was carried out for a month.
- Research techniques: bibliographic review, observation, field diary and indepth interviews with 45 people (doctors, nurses, patients with diabetes and healers).
- Visits to the health center, the public hospital and a private hospital in Atitlán
  to observe the health services available for the residents. Visits to markets and
  neighborhood to observe the supply and demand of food. Visits to cofradías,
  centers of Mayan spirituality, and houses of Mayan healers to learn about the
  treatments and medicinal plants they use.

• 10/20 years ago diabetes was not that common for indigenous and it was even considered a 'ladino disease'.

**Findings** 

- Physicians attribute the increase in diabetes to the sedentary lifestyle and poor diet.
- Most diabetics consider the disease is caused by emotional situations. However, they are aware of the relationship between diet and diabetes, although they give more importance emotions.
- Most people don't have regular medical check-ups and go to health institutions until they feel unwell.
- For many doctors, natural medicine can be used more as a preventive or used in the early stages of the disease, but not in seriously ill patients.
- People complain that the official health system is very expensive and that doctors don't give personalized attention, which is why they prefer to go to Mayan healers.
- It is possible to **balance** the Western healthcare system with natural medicine, although natural remedies are seen more as a **complement** to drugs than to be effective on their own.

## Conclusions

Most indigenous people combine natural medicine with biomedical medicine to treat diabetes. Physicians recognize the importance of Mayan knowledge and its contributions, although it's a partial acceptance that must still be promoted in practice. Healers are important in the community since many people come to them to seek to heal some condition, whether physical or spiritual, not only out of respect for their wisdom but because it's economically accessible and provides individualized care. Therefore, both Western knowledge and Mayan knowledge must be learned and used indiscriminately to treat indigenous people from diabetes

### References

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