

Diabetes: An Overview

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a problem with the way the body uses digested food for energy. Your body changes the food you eat into sugar. Blood carries the sugar to the cells where it is used for energy. When you have diabetes, sugar cannot get into the cells and stays in the blood instead. This causes high blood sugar. Too much sugar in the blood can damage your blood vessels and organs.

What is the cause?

People with diabetes have high blood sugar because they have problems with insulin. Insulin is a hormone made by the pancreas. (The pancreas is a large gland behind the stomach.) Insulin normally moves the sugar out of the blood and into the cells.

There are 3 main types of diabetes:

- If you have **type 1 diabetes**, your pancreas does not make insulin. This usually happens before the age of 35, but it can happen later. The cause is not yet understood.
- If you have **type 2 diabetes**, your pancreas is making insulin, but your body is not able to use it well. This type of diabetes usually starts in adulthood. You have a higher risk of having type 2 diabetes if you have a family background of Alaska Native, American Indian, African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, or Pacific Islander. Your risk is also increased if you have a family history of diabetes, don't get enough physical activity, or are overweight.
- **Gestational diabetes** is a type of diabetes that can happen during pregnancy because pregnancy hormones can change the way insulin works. This can cause problems for both the mother and the baby. Gestational diabetes usually goes away after delivery, but many women who have gestational diabetes start having type 2 diabetes years later.

What are the symptoms?

Diabetes may not cause any symptoms for months or even years. This is why it's so important to get your blood sugar checked as often as your healthcare provider recommends. The most common symptoms of diabetes include:

- ✓ Urinating a lot.
- ✓ Increased thirst.
- ✓ Increased hunger.

Other symptoms may include:

- ✓ Blurry vision.
- ✓ Dry mouth.
- ✓ Tiredness.
- ✓ Unexpected weight gain or loss.
- ✓ Frequent infections—for example, of the skin, gums, bladder, or vagina.
- ✓ Fruity-smelling breath.
- ✓ Infections that heal slowly.

Over time, high blood sugar damages the blood vessels. The parts most often affected are the eyes, heart, kidneys, and blood vessels to the feet and legs. The blood vessels to the brain can also be damaged. When the blood vessels are damaged, not enough blood gets to the body's organs and they stop working well. Once this happens, you may have poor vision or blindness, a heart attack, kidney failure, amputations, or a stroke.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Your provider will also ask about your personal and family medical history. Your provider will test the level of sugar in your blood. Tests may include:

- ✓ Fasting blood sugar test (FBS). For this test, your blood sugar is tested in the morning before you have eaten anything. Two FBS tests may be needed for a diagnosis.
- ✓ Hemoglobin A1C. The A1C is a blood test that can be used to check your average blood sugar over the past 2 to 3 months.

How is it treated?

The problems caused by diabetes can be delayed or prevented by taking good care of yourself. The goal of treatment is to keep the sugar level in a normal range. This is done with:

- ✓ Frequent checks of your blood sugar.
- ✓ Good nutrition and meal planning.
- ✓ Exercise.
- ✓ Medicine, including pills or insulin, depending on the type of diabetes that you have.

How can I help take care of myself?

If you have diabetes, here are some things you can do to stay healthy:

- ✓ Eat healthy.
- ✓ Get enough exercise.
- ✓ Keep track of your blood sugar and keep it at the level your healthcare provider recommends.
- ✓ Follow your healthcare provider's directions for taking your medicine.
- ✓ Keep your blood pressure normal.

- ✓ Keep your cholesterol normal.
- ✓ Prevent infection.
- ✓ Get your eyes and feet checked every year.
- ✓ Take care of your teeth and gums by getting regular dental check-ups.
- ✓ Don't smoke.
- ✓ Avoid stress or learn how to manage it.
- ✓ Keep your regular appointments with your healthcare provider.

Ask your healthcare provider:

- ✓ How and when you will hear your test results.
- ✓ How to take care of yourself at home.
- ✓ What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them.

Make sure you know when you should come back for a regular checkup and when you should call your healthcare provider right away.

You can get more information about diabetes from:

American Diabetes Association
1-800-DIABETES (800-342-2383)
<http://www.diabetes.org/>

National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse
<http://diabetes.niddk.nih.gov>.

How can I prevent diabetes?

Type 1 diabetes cannot be prevented. If you do not have type 2 diabetes now, you should take prevention very seriously. There are some things you can do to keep from getting this disease:

- ✓ Eat healthy.
- ✓ Get enough exercise.
- ✓ Lose weight if you are overweight.

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