

Frequently Asked Questions

What is diabetes?

Diabetes mellitus is a disease in which the body does not make enough **insulin** or does not use it as it should. Insulin is a **hormone** that helps balance the amount of **glucose** in your blood.

Normally, your body changes most of the food you eat into glucose. Glucose is then carried to the body's **cells** with the help of insulin. If your body does not make enough insulin, or the insulin does not work as it should, the glucose cannot enter the body's cells. Instead, it stays in the blood. This makes your blood glucose level too high.

What are the types of diabetes?

There are two types of diabetes:

Type 1—People with type 1 diabetes need to take insulin to survive because the body makes little or no insulin on its own.

Type 2—In people with type 2 diabetes, insulin is produced, but it does not work as it should. The body becomes resistant to the effects of insulin and produces more insulin to keep glucose levels normal. Over time, the body cannot maintain high enough levels to keep the glucose levels normal, and diabetes develops. Type 2 diabetes also may develop as a result of other diseases or as a side effect of certain medications.

People with type 2 diabetes may not need to take insulin. They may be able to control their glucose levels with proper diet, medication, or both.

What are risk factors for diabetes?

Risk factors for type 2 diabetes include

- being overweight
- not being physically active
- having a parent, sister, or brother with diabetes
- having a history of [gestational diabetes](#) or a baby weighing more than 9 pounds at birth
- having prediabetes
- having [high blood pressure](#), reduced “good” [cholesterol](#), or high levels of [triglycerides](#)
- having a history of [cardiovascular disease](#)
- having [polycystic ovary syndrome \(PCOS\)](#)
- having other conditions associated with insulin resistance

Who is most often affected by type 2 diabetes?

Anyone can develop type 2 diabetes, but some people are affected more often than others. This includes people of African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and Pacific Islander descent.

What are the symptoms of diabetes?

The symptoms of type 1 diabetes include

- increased thirst or urination
- constant hunger
- weight loss without trying
- blurred vision
- extreme fatigue

The symptoms of type 2 diabetes include

- any symptoms of type 1 diabetes
- sores that are slow to heal
- dry, itchy skin
- loss of feeling or tingling in feet
- infections, such as a [yeast infection](#) , that keep coming back

What tests are available to detect diabetes?

Four types of blood tests are used to diagnose diabetes:

1. Fasting plasma glucose test—This test is the easiest and most common way to check for diabetes and prediabetes. It is more accurate when it is done in the morning. Before the test, you must fast (not eat or drink anything but water) for at least 8 hours. One sample of blood is needed.
2. Random, also called casual, plasma glucose test—You do not have to fast for this test. This test is used along with symptoms to diagnose diabetes. It is not used to diagnose prediabetes.
3. Oral glucose tolerance test—Before you have this test, you must fast for at least 8 hours. You will first have a fasting plasma glucose test and drink a liquid that contains glucose. Blood samples are taken to measure your blood glucose within the next 2 hours.
4. Hemoglobin A1C test—You do not need to fast before this test. Test results reflect the blood glucose level over the past several months. For this reason, it is used to track how well a person with diabetes is managing blood glucose levels. It also can be used to diagnose prediabetes and diabetes.

Who should be tested?

You should be tested for diabetes every 3 years if you are 45 or older. You also should be tested if you are younger than 45, overweight, and have one or more additional risk factors. If you have prediabetes, you should be tested again in 1 to 2 years.

Women who have had gestational diabetes should be tested with an oral glucose tolerance test 6 to 12 weeks after delivery. If results of this test are normal, re-testing for diabetes every 3 years is recommended.

What can happen if diabetes is not well controlled?

If diabetes is not controlled, long-term, severe health problems may develop, including

- [kidney disease](#) that can lead to high blood pressure or kidney failure
- eye problems that can lead to blindness
- nerve damage and blood vessel damage in the feet that can cause pain, numbness, infection, and possibly the need to remove a toe, foot, or leg
- high blood cholesterol levels that can lead to [stroke](#) and heart disease
- certain infections, such as [bladder](#) or kidney infections, vaginal infections, yeast infections, and skin infections
- problems in pregnancy
- thyroid problems

How can women with diabetes prepare for pregnancy?

If you have diabetes, preparing for pregnancy can improve your health and that of your future child (see [A Healthy Pregnancy for Women With Diabetes](#)). Plan to see your health care practitioner before you get pregnant to discuss your care. You should try to have good control over your glucose level a number of weeks before you get pregnant. Your health care practitioner may suggest changes in your care that will help lower your glucose to a normal range.

How can diabetes be prevented?

- Keep your weight in the range that is healthy for you.
- Eat a well-balanced diet to help keep your cholesterol, blood pressure, and weight at a healthy level. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's website "ChooseMyPlate" (www.choosemyplate.gov) can help you plan a balanced diet.

- Try to exercise for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week.

Glossary

Bladder: A hollow, muscular organ in which urine is stored.

Cardiovascular Disease: Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

Cells: The smallest units of a structure in the body. Cells are the building blocks for all parts of the body.

Cholesterol: A natural substance that is a building block for cells and hormones. This substance helps carry fat through the blood vessels for use or storage in other parts of the body.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Gestational Diabetes: Diabetes that starts during pregnancy.

Glucose: A sugar in the blood that is the body's main source of fuel.

High Blood Pressure: Blood pressure above the normal level. Also called hypertension.

Hormone: A substance made in the body that controls the function of cells or organs.

Insulin: A hormone that lowers the levels of glucose (sugar) in the blood.

Kidney Disease: A general term for any disease that affects how the kidneys function.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS): A condition that leads to a hormone imbalance that affects a woman's monthly menstrual periods, ovulation, ability to get pregnant, and metabolism.

Stroke: A sudden interruption of blood flow to all or part of the brain, caused by blockage or bursting of a blood vessel in the brain. A stroke often results in loss of consciousness and temporary or permanent paralysis.

Triglycerides: A form of body fat found in the blood and tissues. High levels can cause heart disease.

Yeast Infection: Infections caused by an overgrowth of a fungus. Symptoms may include itching, burning, and irritation of the vulva or vagina and a thick, white discharge.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

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