

# Diabetes

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## What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a disease that results when the body doesn't produce any, or too little, insulin—a hormone made by the pancreas and used by cells to process glucose (a form of sugar) for energy. Diabetes can also result if the body doesn't properly respond to insulin. When this happens, the body is unable to correctly use and store glucose. As a result, too much glucose builds up in the blood, leading to common symptoms of diabetes.

When the blood contains excess glucose, this leads to high blood sugar levels. This can cause severe health problems, or even death, if left untreated. For example, high blood sugar levels can damage the vessels that supply blood to our vital organs. In turn, this raises the risk of stroke, heart and kidney disease, eye problems and nerve disorders. Serious diabetes-related nerve disorders can affect the feet and lead to amputations of the lower limbs. What's more, complications from diabetes can also result in nerve disorders that may cause digestion problems and erectile dysfunction.

## Are there different types of diabetes?

There are three main types of diabetes: type 1, type 2 and gestational diabetes. In type 1 diabetes, the body doesn't produce any insulin. In type 2 diabetes—the most common form of the disease—the body produces insulin but not enough to function properly. Gestational diabetes affects women during pregnancy, usually around their 24th week.

## Who gets diabetes?

In general, type 1 diabetes occurs most often in kids, but the disease can happen at any age. Type 1 diabetes is also more common among whites than nonwhites. In contrast, type 2 diabetes occurs more often in older, mainly overweight folks. But the disease is more common among African Americans, Latinos, American Indians and some Asian Americans, as well as Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders.

According to the Office of Women's Health, a division of the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, almost 24 million Americans have diabetes. Of this group, about half of them are women, and up to one-quarter don't know they have the disease.

## What are the symptoms of diabetes?

The symptoms of type 1 and type 2 are generally the same, but some people with type 2 diabetes display milder signs that may go unnoticed. Your doctor can test you for diabetes, or you can take

a risk test to find out if you are at increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Typically, the symptoms of diabetes include:

- Frequent urination
- Extreme thirst
- Extreme hunger
- Weight gain
- Unintended weight loss
- Fatigue and feelings of tiredness or listlessness
- Irritability
- Blurry vision
- Cuts and bruises that don't heal quickly or properly
- Numbness or tingling, particularly in the hands and feet
- Itchy skin
- Skin and yeast infections
- Gum infections and gum disease
- Red, swollen gums that pull away from the teeth
- Sexual dysfunction in men

See your doctor if you have one or more of these symptoms.

What are the risk factors for diabetes?

The main risk factor for type 1 diabetes is having family members who have the disease. According to the American Diabetes Association, anyone whose mother, father, sister or brother had type 1 diabetes should get screened for the disease. In addition, you're at risk for type 1 diabetes if you have a history of injury or disease involving the pancreas.

The most common risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes include being obese or overweight and older than age 45, as well as having high blood pressure, insulin resistance, a sedentary lifestyle, prediabetes (a milder form of diabetes), polycystic ovary syndrome, a history of diabetes during pregnancy, and family members who have the disease.

What are the tests for diabetes?

A battery of blood sugar tests screen for type 1 and type 2 diabetes. These include the glycated hemoglobin (A1C) test, random blood sugar test, fasting blood sugar test and oral glucose tolerance test. The tests for gestational diabetes are performed after a doctor's evaluation of your

risk factors for this type of diabetes. Commonly used screening tests to check for diabetes during pregnancy include the initial glucose challenge test and the follow-up glucose tolerance test.

What are the treatment options for diabetes?

Common recommendations for treating diabetes include eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular physical activity and monitoring your blood sugar. Doctors might prescribe insulin shots and oral medications, depending on type of diabetes.

For more information about diabetes, please visit our sister site [Real Health](#).

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