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Diabetes: What the Diagnosis Means

If you just found out you have diabetes, you probably have a lot of questions and you may feel a little uncertain. It may help to know you're not alone. In the United States, nearly 16 million people have diabetes. Most of these people lead full, healthy lives. One of the best things you can do for yourself is to learn all you can about diabetes. This handout will tell you some of the basics about diabetes.

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What is diabetes?

Your body changes most of the food you eat into glucose (a form of sugar). Insulin is a hormone produced by the pancreas that allows glucose to enter all the cells of your body and be used as energy. Diabetes is a disease that occurs when a person's body doesn't make enough insulin or can't use insulin properly. When you have diabetes, the sugar builds up in your blood instead of moving into the cells. Some, but not all, of the excess sugar is carried out of your body (through urine), and the energy is wasted.

There are two types of diabetes. Type 1 occurs when the body doesn't produce any insulin. People with type 2 diabetes either don't produce enough insulin or their cells ignore the insulin. Nearly 95% of people with diabetes have type 2.

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How can I help myself stay healthy if I have diabetes?

Although diabetes can't be cured, you can live a long and healthy life. The single most important thing you can do is control your blood sugar level. You can do this by eating right, exercising, maintaining a healthy weight and, if needed, taking oral medicines or insulin.

Eat a healthy diet. The recommended diet for many people who have diabetes is very similar to that suggested for people who don't have diabetes. It's important to eat at least 3 meals per day and never skip a meal. For more information, read our "[Diabetes and Nutrition](#)" handout.

Exercise. Exercising will help your body use insulin and lower your blood sugar level. For more information, read our "[Diabetes and Exercise](#)" handout.

Maintain a healthy weight. Losing excess weight and maintaining a healthy body weight will help you in 2 ways. First, it helps insulin work better in your body. Second, it will lower your blood pressure and decrease your risk for heart disease.

Take your medicine. If your diabetes can't be controlled with diet, exercise and weight control, your doctor may recommend medicine or insulin. Oral medicines (taken by mouth) can make your body produce more insulin or help your body use the insulin it makes more efficiently. Some people need to add insulin to their bodies. Always take medicines exactly as your doctor tells you to. For more information, read our "[Diabetes Medicines](#)" handout.

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How do I check my blood sugar level?

Your doctor may suggest that you check your blood sugar level (also called blood glucose level) at home. Checking your blood sugar level involves pricking your finger to get a small drop of blood that you put on a test strip. You can read the results yourself or insert the strip into a machine called an electronic glucose meter. To learn more, read our "[Monitoring Your Blood Sugar](#)" handout.

Check your blood sugar level as often as your doctor suggests. You may need to check it more often at first, until you get the feel for how it changes and what makes it change.

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What if my blood sugar gets too low?

People with diabetes are at risk of hypoglycemia, also called low blood sugar. Hypoglycemia occurs when the amount of sugar in your blood drops. The signs of low blood sugar may include having a headache, sweating, and feeling weak or anxious. Talk to your doctor about how to treat hypoglycemia. Usually, you can correct this problem by quickly eating some candy or drinking some regular (not diet) soda or fruit juice.

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What health problems can diabetes cause?

Diabetes can be a dangerous and life-threatening disease if you don't control your blood sugar level. Over time, high blood sugar levels can damage your eyes, blood vessels, nerves and kidneys. Here are some of the problems (also called complications) diabetes can cause:

Blindness: Diabetes can damage the small blood vessels in the retina. It is the leading cause of blindness in people ages 20 to 74. For more information, read our "[How to Take Care of Your Eyes and Feet](#)" handout.

Heart disease: People with diabetes are 2 to 4 times more likely to have heart disease and damage to the blood vessels in the heart. This increases their risk of heart attack and stroke. For more information, read our "[Diabetes and Heart Disease](#)" handout.

Nerve and blood vessel damage: Damage to blood vessels in the legs can limit the supply of blood to the nerves in the legs and feet. This can make it difficult to feel injuries (such as foot sores). Damage to the blood vessels can also put you at risk for infections and sores that don't heal. In severe cases, parts of the foot or lower leg may have to be amputated (removed). For more information, read our "[Diabetic Neuropathy](#)" handout.

Kidney disease: Diabetes can damage the small blood vessels in the kidneys, which then can't filter out the body's waste. In some people, the kidneys stop working completely. These people require dialysis or a kidney transplant. Dialysis is a treatment that eliminates wastes in the blood. For more information, please read our "[Diabetic Nephropathy](#)" handout.

The good news is that diabetic complications can often be prevented by taking care of yourself, following your doctor's orders and controlling your blood sugar level. For more information on how to prevent these problems, please read our "[Preventing Diabetic Complications](#)" handout.

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Other Organizations

- [American Diabetes Association](#)
<http://www.diabetes.org/home.jsp>
1701 North Beauregard Street

Alexandria, VA 22311
1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383)

- [Revolution Health Diabetes Community](http://www.revolutionhealth.com/forums/diabetes)
<http://www.revolutionhealth.com/forums/diabetes>

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