

Diabetes explained

Diabetes is a chronic condition marked by high blood glucose (sugar) levels. Our bodies rely on blood glucose for energy.

Blood glucose levels are normally regulated by a hormone called insulin, which is made by the pancreas.

Insulin stimulates the body's cells to use glucose as energy. When a person has diabetes, the pancreas doesn't make enough insulin, or the cells don't respond to the hormone.

Latest research has shown that in the Australian population aged 25 years or older, 7.5 per cent have diabetes. The risk of diabetes increases with age, from 2.5 per cent in people aged between 35-45 years to 23.6 per cent in those over 75. Aboriginal people have one of the highest rates of Type 2 diabetes in the world.

There are two main types of diabetes

Type 1 (insulin dependent diabetes mellitus):

- Is caused by an autoimmune destruction of insulin-making cells in the pancreas, which means insulin is no longer made.
- Is one of the most common childhood diseases in developed nations.
- Can occur at any age.

Type 2 (non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus) is:

- Caused by either inadequate levels of insulin or insulin that doesn't work effectively in the body.
- Most common after the age of 40, although the age of onset can be earlier.
- Often, but not always, associated with obesity, particularly around the abdomen or upper body.
- Found in families, but no specific genes have been found.
- Responsible for 85 to 90 per cent of all diabetes in developed countries.

Symptoms of high blood glucose

When there are high levels of glucose in the blood, the body loses its main source of energy, even though the blood contains large amounts of glucose. The build-up of glucose in the blood can cause distressing symptoms and actual harm to the body's cells. Symptoms include:

- Extreme tiredness
- Excessive thirst
- Blurred vision
- Increased risk of infections.

Get help immediately if these symptoms occur

Occasionally, the onset of diabetes - particularly Type 1 - can be abrupt. It can lead to a condition called 'keto acidosis', which is a medical emergency. The symptoms of this condition are loss of appetite, weight loss, vomiting, excessive passing of urine, altered consciousness and, finally, coma. Seek medical help immediately if these symptoms occur.

Untreated diabetes can cause long term damage

If untreated, high blood glucose levels can be life threatening. The damage to the body's cells can cause:

- Kidney damage

- Eye damage
- Nerve damage to feet and other parts of the body
- Heart disease and circulation problems in the legs
- Stroke
- Impotence.

Types of help available

There is no cure for diabetes, but the symptoms can be controlled. The treatment depends on the type of diabetes. The aim of all treatment is to control blood glucose levels, blood pressure, weight and blood fat levels. Treatments can include:

- A low fat, high carbohydrate diet.
- Regular exercise.
- Avoiding cigarettes.
- Insulin injections or tablets to control blood glucose levels.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Diabetes Australia Victoria Tel. 1300 136 588
- International Diabetes Institute Tel. (03) 9258 5000
- Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation Tel. (03) 9696 3866

Things to remember

- People with diabetes have high blood glucose levels, caused by a problem with the hormone insulin.
- Diabetes is a common chronic condition.
- There is no cure, but the symptoms can be controlled with diet, exercise and medication.

Want to know more?

For references, related links and support group information, go to [More information](#).

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:



International Diabetes Institute

More Information

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Updates

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