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# diabetes and its symptoms



## Diabetes

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Diabetes is a common condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in your blood is too high. Glucose comes from the digestion of starchy or sugary food and is normally controlled by insulin, a hormone produced by your pancreas.

If insulin is missing or is not being used by your body effectively, glucose absorbed from food cannot be used as an energy source. Its concentration then increases in your blood.

### **Diabetes is a very common disease**

There are 285 million people with diabetes worldwide and it has been estimated that this will reach 438 million by the year 2030. In the UK there are more than 2.8 million people with diabetes, with many who do not even know they have the disease.

### **Causes of diabetes**

The cause of diabetes is complex and is not yet completely known.

Diabetes can occur as a consequence of inherited and environmental factors (viruses, toxins, diet) which often, when acting together, cause an insulin deficit. As well as your body not producing enough insulin, in many cases, especially in overweight people, the cells in your body can become resistant to the action of insulin.

In the case of children and teenagers with a predisposition to diabetes, certain viruses or alterations of the immune system can trigger the disease.

There are some other causes of diabetes but they are all very rare; these include certain diseases of the pancreas.

## Symptoms

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It is important to remember that diabetes can occur without any symptoms. Diabetes is a complex disease and not everyone has the same symptoms. In general, excess sugar in blood is removed by the kidneys, using up large amounts of water in the process: so one of the most common symptoms is that you may pass more urine and drink a lot more in order to compensate for the loss of liquid.

In children and young people the onset of diabetes can be rapid, with symptoms which are more clear-cut and striking. These include:

- Tiredness
- Excessive Thirst
- Weight Loss
- Frequent Urination
- Blurred Vision

### **Diabetes can occur without any symptoms**

In adults and the elderly, the onset of diabetes is more gradual, with symptoms which are not as clear. Some people show only one or two symptoms but more than half of people with diabetes have no symptoms at all. Therefore there are many people with diabetes who, because their symptoms are mild, do not notice any particular problem (this is known as Type 2 diabetes)

The most common symptoms in adults and the elderly are:

- Increased number of skin infections & thrush
- Generalised itching or itching in the genital organs
- Delayed healing of wounds
- Infections of the gums
- Worsening of vision
- Cramp
- Lethargy
- Pain or tingling at the extremities



## Diagnosis

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The diagnosis of diabetes is easy when the main symptoms occur, but if the symptoms are more subtle and are less striking the diagnosis can be more complex.

Many people with undiagnosed diabetes may feel fine. However the normal functioning of internal organs (eyes, kidneys, nerves and blood vessels etc.) may be affected and within a few years complications may result. In these cases the diagnosis is often found during a routine check-up or blood test.

Diabetes can occasionally also occur during pregnancy, which is known as “gestational diabetes” and is usually detected during routine ante-natal tests at a round 4-5 months.

However in all cases, the diagnosis of diabetes must be confirmed by a venous blood test, which should be conducted by your doctor.

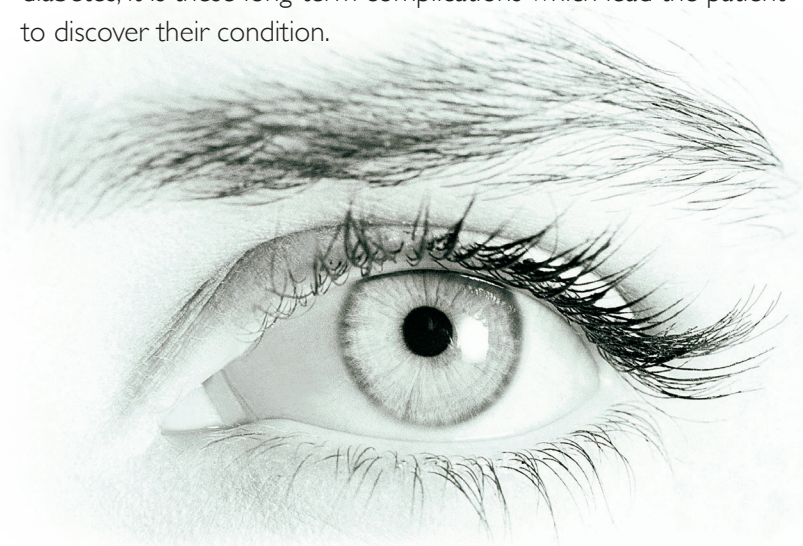
## Possible complications

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Poorly controlled diabetes can result in dangerous complications due to increases or decreases in blood glucose levels.

In some cases short-term complications, such as diabetes ketoacidosis (DKA), can require urgent hospital treatment to stabilise the situation.

There are many possible long-term complications caused by poor glucose control. These relate mostly to damaged blood vessels and nerves and while many people may feel fine, actually their internal organs (eyes, kidneys, nerves and blood vessels) are deteriorating in function, which can lead to kidney failure and blindness. Often with undiagnosed diabetes, it is these long-term complications which lead the patient to discover their condition.



People with diabetes are more at risk of heart disease so it is important that your blood pressure and cholesterol levels are monitored regularly. This may mean that you have to take drugs to control these as well as your diabetes.

Evidence has shown that people whose diabetes is well controlled minimise their risk of developing complications. For this reason it is important that you are actively involved in controlling your blood glucose levels.

## Treatment

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Diabetes cannot be cured and is a progressive disease, but it can be kept under control and treated very successfully with good management. Being a disease that lasts a whole lifetime, the treatment must be continual and will usually be adjusted throughout the patient's life to take in account any changes in blood glucose levels, weight and activity.

As you now realise, if you have diabetes, you will need to make some changes to your way of life and you may need to change your eating habits, as diet is a very important part of day to day management. The more you eat and drink, the more the intake of sugar increases, resulting in a increase in your blood glucose levels, therefore it is important to eat a healthy diet containing the right balance of foods. You may have to also adjust your diet according to any medication you take and your daily routine.

In order to keep well and healthy it is important that you work closely with your care team; you will gain an essential understanding of your own diabetes, enabling you to be in control of your condition. For all people living with diabetes, your care plan will consist of the following:

- Healthy diet – low in saturated fat and sugar
- Drugs – in the form of insulin injections or tablets
- Regular physical exercise
- Lifestyle changes
- Medical reviews
- Ongoing education about your diabetes
- Instruction on blood testing and what the results mean

# **There are two main types of diabetes**

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## **Type 1 diabetes**

This was previously called Insulin-Dependent or Juvenile Onset diabetes. Type 1 diabetes mainly occurs in children and teenagers and almost always occurs for the first time in people below 30 years of age.

It usually starts more quickly with very obvious symptoms. Type 1 diabetes represents 10-15% of all diabetes. As the pancreas does not produce insulin it is necessary to inject it in order to survive.

## **Type 2 diabetes**

This was previously called Non Insulin-Dependent or Maturity Onset diabetes. Type 2 diabetes usually occurs in people over 40 years of age but can also be found in children and younger adult age groups particularly where there is obesity.

Type 2 is the most frequent form of diabetes representing around 85% of all cases. It starts gradually with less obvious symptoms and it can often go unnoticed for some time. Type 2 diabetes often occurs in overweight people and there may be no weight loss when the disease occurs.

The pancreas continues to produce insulin, although in insufficient amounts, but it may be that the person is "insulin resistant" to his or her own insulin. In early stages of the disease it may be possible to treat it with an appropriate diet and life style changes.

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Republic of Ireland: 1800 709903

Northern Ireland: 0800 7837286

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