

“Just A Little Sugar”: Diabetes and You

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What is diabetes? You may think of sugar, needles, or giving up favorite foods. But what is diabetes, really?

Definition: Diabetes is a shortened name for *diabetes mellitus*. It occurs when the body cannot use fuel properly. When we eat food, our body changes much of it into glucose, or blood sugar. We change glucose into energy within the cells of our body. We do this with the use of insulin. The healthy body makes enough insulin so that this process goes on day and night, throughout our lives.

When a person’s body does not make enough insulin, or when there is enough insulin but it doesn’t seem to work properly, we say that person has diabetes. Diabetes may be treated by changing the diet, increasing exercise, taking pills or insulin injections, or using a combination of these ways.

Diabetes is never borderline. The terms “mild diabetes” or “just a little sugar” are not proper terms for diabetes because they make us think it is not serious. Untreated diabetes may cause blindness, kidney failure, amputations, heart attacks, and strokes. Diabetes can be controlled, but it doesn’t go away and it can’t be cured.

Who gets diabetes? Diabetes tends to run in families. It doesn’t skip generations. Gaining too much weight may bring on an early diagnosis of diabetes, but eating sweets does not cause this disease. We are more likely to develop diabetes as we age or when we experience life stresses, such as surgery, major illness, pregnancy, and even emotional stress.

Persons who are of African-American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latin, or Asian/Pacific Island heritage are more likely to get diabetes than other groups of people.

How do I know if I have it? The only way you can really know if you have diabetes is to be tested.

Many times, the only sign of diabetes is being more tired than usual. Other signs are:

- Being very thirsty
- Urinating more than usual—often at night
- Blurred vision
- Losing weight without trying
- Having very dry skin
- Having sores that heal slowly
- Getting more infections than usual
- Losing feeling or getting a tingling feeling in the toes or feet
- Feeling tired much of the time

If you have some of these symptoms, you need to see a doctor to have testing done.

Are there different kinds of diabetes?

There are several types of diabetes.

Type 1 diabetes usually happens before the age of 20. People who have Type 1 diabetes do not make any insulin and must take insulin injections every day for life.

Type 2 is the most common kind of diabetes. It usually happens later in life. It may be treated in many ways: diet, exercise, pills, or insulin injections. Sometimes as little as 10 pounds of weight loss can make a big difference in managing Type 2 diabetes.

Gestational diabetes happens during pregnancy. It can be dangerous for both baby and mother. Having this kind of diabetes increases a woman’s risk of getting either Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes later in life.

What should I do about diabetes? If you have diabetes you will need to have help with planning

meals, finding an exercise program that is right for you, learning how to test blood glucose at home, and taking any needed medications. The first step should be seeing a doctor and helping to choose a treatment plan that will fit your lifestyle.

You may be referred to a diabetes educator. This person may be a teaching nurse or a registered dietitian or another medical professional who is specially trained to help you make any changes needed to manage your diabetes.

You may feel blue or guilty when you are first told you have diabetes. This is normal, but if it continues it can keep you from getting lifesaving help.

How can I help someone else? If you are a family member, caregiver, or friend of someone with diabetes, you can be a very important part of the treatment team.

Remember that not all cases of diabetes are alike. Ask the person with diabetes about special food needs. Be prepared to serve foods in their “natural” state, without a lot of extra sauces or sugars. Offer a variety of vegetables at meals or snacks since they are low in calories, fat, and sugar. Don’t scold or nag. Sugar and sweets can be part of a healthy diabetic diet, but let the person with diabetes choose.

What about complications of diabetes?

When diabetes is not treated or when a person has had this disease for a long time, complications can happen.

Heart disease is the leading cause of sickness and death in people with diabetes. When people with diabetes have heart attacks, they are more likely to die or to have a second attack than people without diabetes. Diabetes also causes strokes and disease of the blood vessels of the legs and feet.

Kidney disease can happen to people with diabetes, especially if they also have high blood pressure.

Eye disease caused by diabetes can lead to blindness. The good news is that this kind of blindness almost always can be prevented.

Nerve disease is common in diabetes. Burning pain, tingling, or numbness in toes are danger signs. These changes can lead to amputations. Impotence in men with diabetes is very common and is caused by nerve and blood vessel changes.

Infections are common when diabetes is not well controlled. Women may have a lot of vaginal yeast

infections. The feet, mouth, and skin are places where infections are common and sometimes hard to control.

Getting help. Since diabetes can cause serious complications, you will want to find out as much as you can about caring for yourself if you have this disease. Write down questions to ask your doctor or diabetes educator before each visit.

Many communities have support groups for people with diabetes. Free information and referrals usually are available from doctors, hospitals, and pharmacies. Ask for help!

More Information:

The American Diabetes Association can provide information and referrals to support groups. Call 1-800-342-2383. Check the Web site (<http://www.diabetes.org>).

The American Association of Diabetes Educators can provide educational materials and referrals to a diabetes educator in your area. Call 1-312-424-2426 or check the Web site (<http://www.aadenet.org>).

The Center for Disease Control funds diabetes control programs in West Virginia and all other states. Check its diabetes home page (<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ddt/ddthome.htm>).

A list of free educational brochures about diabetes is available from the National Institute of Health’s Web site (<http://www.niddk.nih.gov>).

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