

Over 2 million people in England are living with diabetes. Many more have the condition but don't know it. Type 1 and type 2 are the most common forms. The causes of both types are different but both result in too much glucose (sugar) in the blood.

Type 1 diabetes

Type 1 diabetes is caused by the body's failure to produce insulin. Insulin is a hormone released by the pancreas to help control levels of sugar in the blood. It's sometimes called juvenile diabetes or early on-set diabetes because it usually appears before the age of 40.

Type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes is caused by the body not producing enough insulin or not using what is produced effectively. It's the most common form and accounts for around 90% of all diabetes.

Diabetes can increase the risk of developing other conditions, such as heart disease. It can be managed effectively and many people with diabetes lead a healthy, active life.

Diabetes can also occur in pregnancy. This is known as gestational diabetes. Some pregnant women have high levels of glucose in their blood because their bodies do not produce enough insulin to meet the extra demands of pregnancy. It affects less than one in 20 pregnant women and usually disappears after birth. Although women with gestational diabetes are more at risk of developing type 2 later in life.

The symptoms of type 1 and type 2 diabetes are similar. However, type 1 diabetes usually develops suddenly over weeks or even days. Many people have type 2 diabetes for years without knowing it because early symptoms can be vague and may not seem important at the time.

It's important to seek medical advice if you think you might have signs of diabetes. Early diagnosis reduces your risk of developing complications.

Symptoms of diabetes can include:

- feeling thirsty all the time
- frequent urination
- tiredness
- weight loss
- muscle wasting
- frequent infections or slow-healing sores
- itchiness around the vagina or penis
- regular episodes of thrush
- blurred vision

These symptoms may be due to other conditions, so it's important you seek medical advice and diagnosis.

As extra fluids build up in your blood, the kidney processes it and moves it to the bladder, which makes you want to go to the toilet more than usual. Urinating more means you also feel thirsty more often. Frequent urination and excessive thirst are early symptoms of diabetes.

As glucose cannot enter your cells, they do not get the energy they need to make them work. This makes you feel tired and run down. Sometimes diabetes symptoms are flu like and you may also notice weakness and loss of appetite. As your muscles and organs lack the energy they need, this can trigger feelings of intense hunger. Even if you're eating more than usual, your muscle tissues may shrink and you may lose weight.

High levels of glucose in the bloodstream draw fluid from tissues, including the lenses of your eyes. Consequently, vision may become blurred. In the long-term, untreated diabetes damages the retina of the eye and can lead to blindness. High levels of blood glucose can affect the immune system (your body's self-defence mechanism against germs). This may interfere with your ability to fight infections. Bladder and vaginal infections such as thrush can be particular problems for women, as less glucose creates an ideal breeding ground for thrush.

Complications

If diabetes isn't treated it can lead to a number of health problems, including heart disease and eye damage. Large amounts of glucose in the blood can damage blood vessels, nerves and organs and even a mildly raised glucose level may cause damaging effects over time. Good management of diabetes, together with regular exercise and good eating habits, can help reduce your risk of developing complications.

Heart disease and stroke

If you have diabetes, you're up to three times more likely to develop heart disease or stroke compared to people without diabetes. Prolonged, poorly controlled blood glucose levels increase the likelihood of atherosclerosis (furring up and narrowing of the blood vessels). This may result in a poor blood supply to the heart, causing angina. It also increases the chance that a blood vessel in the heart or brain will become completely blocked, causing a heart attack or stroke.

Retinopathy

Blood vessels in the retina of the eye can become blocked, leaky or grow strangely which, in the long-term, can damage vision. Smoking increases the risk of diabetes-induced sight loss. Regular eye checks are essential to pick up on potential sight problems early.

Foot problems

Damage to the nerves in the foot can mean that nicks or cuts go unnoticed and may develop into a foot ulcer. About one in 10 people with diabetes get foot ulcers, which can cause serious infection. Warning signs include sores and cuts that do not heal, puffiness or swelling and skin that feels hot to touch. In some cases people have had to have amputation.

Kidney damage

The small blood vessels of the kidney become blocked and leaky, making the kidneys work less efficiently.

Impotence in men

Damage to the nerves and blood vessels can lead to erection problems. This may be treated with medication. It's more common in men that smoke.

If you think you're at risk of diabetes or if you're experiencing symptoms, it's important to talk to your GP. ***Diabetes is a life-long condition, but you can control it by making changes to your lifestyle.***

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