

AgePage

Diabetes and Older Adults

Diabetes is a serious disease that affects many older adults. People get diabetes when their blood glucose, also called blood sugar, is too high. The good news is that you can take steps to delay or prevent type 2 diabetes, which is the most common form of the disease to develop in older adults. If you already have diabetes, there are things you can do to manage the condition and prevent diabetes-related health problems.

What Is Diabetes?

Our bodies turn a lot of the food we eat into sugar, called glucose, which is the body's main source of energy. Insulin is a hormone made by the pancreas that helps glucose get into your cells to be used for energy. If you have diabetes, your body doesn't make enough — or any — insulin, or it doesn't use insulin properly. That can cause too much glucose to stay in the blood, which can cause health problems over time.

Types of Diabetes

There are two main kinds of diabetes, called type 1 and type 2.

- If you have **type 1 diabetes**, your body makes little or no insulin. Although older adults can develop this type of diabetes, it occurs most often in children and young adults. People with type 1 diabetes need to take insulin every day.

- If you have **type 2 diabetes**, the cells in your body do not use insulin properly. Type 2 diabetes is the most common kind of diabetes. People who are middle-aged or older are more likely to develop this type of diabetes. Your chance of getting type 2 diabetes is higher if you have overweight or obesity, an inactive lifestyle, a family history of diabetes, or a history of gestational diabetes (a type of diabetes that develops during pregnancy). People who are African American, American Indian, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, or Pacific Islander also have a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

What Is Prediabetes?

Millions of older Americans have prediabetes. People with prediabetes have blood glucose levels that are higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. If you have prediabetes, you have a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes in the future. You also have a higher risk for heart disease than people with normal glucose levels.

If you have prediabetes, there are steps you can take to prevent or delay getting type 2 diabetes. These include working towards a healthy weight, being physically active, practicing healthy eating, and quitting smoking. Your doctor can help you set up a plan to make changes to reduce your risk. Your doctor may also talk with you about taking medication to delay or prevent type 2 diabetes. Ask how often you should have your blood glucose measured to check your progress toward normal blood sugar levels.

Symptoms of Type 2 Diabetes

Symptoms of type 2 diabetes may include feeling unusually tired, increased hunger or thirst, unexplained weight loss, urinating often, or numbness or tingling in hands or feet. You may also get blurred vision and skin infections, and your body may heal more slowly from cuts and

bruises. Some people with type 2 diabetes may not realize they have it because symptoms often develop slowly and go unnoticed. Sometimes older adults dismiss these symptoms as being part of “getting old,” but they can be signs of a serious problem. Talk with your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.

Tests for Diabetes

If you have symptoms or risk factors for diabetes, it’s important to get tested. Getting an early diagnosis can help you manage your diabetes and prevent health problems. Doctors use several blood tests to help diagnose diabetes:

- The **fasting plasma glucose test** measures your blood glucose level at a single point in time. Most of the time, your doctor will give you the test in the morning after you have fasted (had nothing to eat or drink except water) for at least eight hours.
- The **A1C test measures** your average levels of blood glucose over the past three months. You can eat and drink before this test. The A1C test may not be accurate in people with certain other diseases and conditions, so your doctor may use other tests in addition to A1C to diagnose diabetes.
- The **random plasma glucose test** can be given at any time during the day. Sometimes doctors use this test to diagnose diabetes when you have symptoms, and no fasting is required.
- The **oral glucose tolerance test** is more expensive than some other tests and not as easy to give. First, the doctor measures your blood glucose after fasting overnight. Then

you drink a sugary liquid and the doctor tests your blood glucose again after two hours.

Your doctor may want you to be tested for diabetes twice to confirm a diagnosis. If you have diabetes, you will likely work with your primary care doctor to manage the condition. In some cases, your primary care provider may refer you to a specialist such as an endocrinologist, a doctor who specializes in taking care of people with diabetes.

Managing Type 2 Diabetes

A person with diabetes may need to manage the disease with lifestyle changes, medication, or both. Some people with type 2 diabetes can manage their blood glucose levels with diet and exercise alone. Others may need diabetes pills or insulin injections, along with medicines to treat other conditions like high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Ask your health care provider questions about your medications to make sure you understand how they work, how to take them, and what side effects may occur.

Once you’ve been diagnosed with diabetes, your health care provider will work with you to create a diabetes management self-care plan to help manage the condition. Your plan will be based on your lifestyle, preferences, health goals, and other health conditions you may have. As part of your plan, your doctor may also prescribe one or more medications.

Other health care professionals may also be involved in your care. For example, a diabetes

Diabetes and Brain Health

If you have diabetes, your doctor may screen you for depression or cognitive impairment. Older adults with diabetes are at higher risk for these conditions, compared with others their age who do not have diabetes. Having depression or cognitive impairment can make diabetes self-care challenging.

educator can help you understand diabetes and provide support as you make recommended lifestyle changes. A dietitian may help with meal planning. And an exercise coach can help you become more physically active.

Managing your diabetes involves taking care of yourself each day. Your daily self-care plan to control your blood glucose may include:

- **Tracking your blood glucose levels.** Very high glucose levels (called hyperglycemia) or very low glucose levels (called hypoglycemia) can put your health at risk. Your self-care plan will tell you how often you should check your blood glucose levels and how often to get the A1C test. If you are managing your diabetes without taking insulin, you may not need to check your glucose as often. But if you need insulin to manage your diabetes, your doctor may recommend a continuous glucose monitor (CGM). CGM devices contain a sensor that attaches to the body and automatically estimates your glucose levels throughout the day and night.
- **Making healthy food choices.** The food you eat affects blood glucose levels, so it's important to learn what's best for you to eat, how much, and when. If you are overweight, work with your health care team to come up with a plan to lose weight.
- **Being active.** Walking and other forms of daily exercise can help improve blood glucose levels in older people with diabetes. Create a plan for being physically active that fits into your life and that you can follow. Your health care team can help. For information on exercise and physical activity, visit www.nia.nih.gov/exercise.
- **Taking your medicines.** You should take medicine as prescribed even when you feel good. Tell your doctor if you have any side effects or cannot afford your medicines. Also, let your doctor know if you have trouble taking your medicine or keeping track of your medication schedule.

Reduce Your Risk of Health Problems

Diabetes can affect many parts of your body. If diabetes is untreated or poorly managed, it can cause serious health problems over time, such as damage to the eyes, kidneys, nerves, feet, and heart. People with type 2 diabetes may also be at greater risk for cancer, depression, and dementia. Here are some strategies to stay as healthy as possible with diabetes:

- **Manage your blood pressure.** Get your blood pressure checked often. High blood pressure increases the risk for heart disease and can damage the eyes and kidneys.
- **Manage your cholesterol.** At least once a year, get a blood test to check your cholesterol and triglyceride levels. High levels may increase your risk for heart problems.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking raises your risk for many health problems, including heart attack and stroke.
- **Have yearly eye exams.** Finding and treating eye problems early can help keep your eyes healthy.
- **Check your kidneys yearly.** Because diabetes can affect your kidneys, getting recommended urine and blood tests will show if your kidneys are healthy.
- **Get annual flu shots and the pneumonia vaccine.** A yearly flu shot will help keep you healthy. If you're over 65, make sure you have had the pneumonia vaccine. If you were younger than 65 when you had the pneumonia vaccine, you may need another one. Ask your doctor.
- **Care for your teeth and gums.** Brush your teeth and floss daily. Have your teeth and gums checked twice a year by a dentist to avoid serious problems.
- **Protect your skin.** Keep your skin clean and use skin softeners for dryness. Take care of minor cuts and bruises to prevent infections.
- **Check your feet.** If you have sores, blisters, breaks in the skin, infections, or a buildup of

calluses, see a foot doctor, called a podiatrist. Keep your feet clean by washing them every day and help protect your feet from damage by wearing shoes and socks at all times.

- **Keep up with cancer screenings.** Ask your doctor which screenings to get based on your age, sex, and other risk factors.
- **Talk with your doctor about your concerns.** If you think you might need help with your management plan, are depressed, are worried about your memory, or have any other concerns, talk with your doctor. There may be ways to help.

When you visit your health care team, your providers will assess how well you are managing your diabetes.

Your care plan may change, or you may need more information and support. A change in health, such as a new diagnosis or complication, or a change in care, such as going home from the hospital, may also lead to updates to your plan.

Be Prepared

Make sure you always have several days' worth of supplies on hand for testing and treating your diabetes in case of an emergency.

Help With Diabetes Costs

Both private health insurance and government programs (such as Medicare, Medicaid, and veterans' health care) help pay for the cost of diabetes care. If you are choosing a health insurance plan or trying to understand your coverage better, ask for a Summary of Benefits and Coverage, which explains the coverage in plain language. It can help you find out how much the plan pays for diabetes medications, supplies and devices (such as an insulin pump,) and visits to see medical specialists. You can also learn about the copayments and deductibles you'll need to pay.

Don't hesitate to tell your health care team if you have trouble paying for your diabetes medicines and supplies. Ask if there are less expensive options or generic versions of the medicines you need for managing diabetes, blood pressure, and cholesterol.

For help paying for diabetes medications and supplies, go to www.niddk.nih.gov and search for "financial assistance for diabetes."

For More Information on Diabetes

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

800-633-4227

www.cms.gov

www.medicare.gov

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

800-860-8747

healthinfo@niddk.nih.gov

www.ndep.nih.gov

www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/diabetes

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging

800-222-2225

800-222-4225 (TTY)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



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