

UNDERSTANDING DIABETES IN OLDER ADULTS

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Diabetes is a group of diseases characterized by high blood glucose levels. Our bodies break down most food into glucose and then use it to fuel our systems.

Our bodies break down most food into glucose and then use it to fuel our systems. In order for the glucose to get into our cells it needs insulin. In people with diabetes, their pancreas either produces little or no insulin, or the cells do not respond appropriately to the insulin.

- **Type 1 diabetes** is usually diagnosed in children and young adults. In type 1, the body does not produce insulin.
- The second and most common form is **type 2 diabetes**. In this case, either the body does not produce enough insulin or the cells ignore it altogether.
- The third form of diabetes is **gestational diabetes**, which occurs during pregnancy

There is also a condition called prediabetes. People with prediabetes almost always have blood glucose levels that are higher than normal, but not yet high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes.

Sadly, diabetes is very common. According to data from the 2011 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 25.8 million children and adults in the United States have diabetes and another 79 million people have prediabetes. Men and women are affected nearly equally. Over one quarter of seniors age 65 and older have diabetes and in general, the Hispanic, African American, Asian American, and Native American communities have greater prevalence of this disease.

Diabetes also carries a significant financial toll. In 2007 the total cost of diabetes in the United States was \$218 billion. Knowing how to prevent diabetes and fully understanding its symptoms are your best defenses to stopping the disease and its ramifications in its tracks. With tips and strategies for your parents to follow before, during and after a visit with a healthcare provider.



Did you know...?

According to the *Handbook of Communication and Aging Research*, in the United States, people over the age of 65 visit their doctor an average of eight times per year, compared to the general population's average of five visits per year.

PREVENTING DIABETES

Several factors increase your risk of getting diabetes:

- One of the most common risk factors is **being overweight**. Excess weight also increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol, and high blood glucose.
- **Smoking** is another risk factor. Smoking hurts your lungs and your heart. It lowers the amount of oxygen that gets to your organs, raises your bad cholesterol, and raises your blood pressure.
- There are some risk factors for diabetes you can't change, such as your **age, race, gender and family history**.

Fortunately, you can prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes through a healthy lifestyle:

- Eating healthy is one of the most important things you can do to lower your risk for type 2 diabetes and heart disease. For example, eat more fresh vegetables, fruits and whole grains, buy leaner meats, and eat smaller portions. You can also save money and your health by buying less soda, sweets, chips, and other snack foods.
- Doing some form of physical activity, at least 150 minutes a week (for example, walking 30 minutes a day, five days a week) is a key way to help prevent type 2 diabetes. The American Diabetes Association suggests four components for a physical activity routine:
 - The first is walking, using the stairs, or just generally moving around throughout the day.
 - Next, add some aerobic exercise, such as a brisk walk, swimming, or dancing.
 - Third is strength training, such as lifting light weights.
 - Fourth is doing some flexibility exercises, such as stretching.

Diabetes doesn't have to be a given. By incorporating these simple measures you can live a happy and healthy life.

Notes:

SYMPTOMS AND WARNING SIGNS

Diabetes often goes undiagnosed because many of its symptoms seem so harmless. In many cases, people with type 2 diabetes display no symptoms at all.

For both type 1 and type 2 diabetes there are several symptoms in common:

- First is **frequent urination**. If you find yourself running to the restroom more than usual and it is accompanied by unusual thirst, you are demonstrating two common symptoms of diabetes.
- **Unusual weight loss** is another common symptom that usually is more noticeable with type 1 diabetes. In type 1, the pancreas stops making insulin which prevents the glucose from entering your cells. The body then looks for another energy source so it starts to break down muscle tissue and fat.
- Glucose-starved cells may also signal the body for more food thus increasing your appetite. Therefore if you experience **extreme hunger** you may be showing signs of diabetes.
- Other common symptoms include **extreme fatigue and irritability**.

Type 2 diabetes has some other less-common symptoms including:

- **Frequent infections, blurred vision, cuts and bruises that are slow to heal, and recurring skin, gum, or bladder infections.**
- **Tingling and numbness in the hands or feet** is another symptom. Because type 2 diabetes has a gradual onset, people are often not aware that they have it and nerve damage could be happening for years before diagnosis.

According to the American Diabetes Association, testing high risk people, even without symptoms, and early detection of diabetes symptoms and treatment can decrease the chance of developing the complications of diabetes. Therefore, be sure to pay attention to the signals your body sends and see your doctor if any of these symptoms start to appear.

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DIAGNOSING DIABETES

If you are experiencing some of the symptoms of diabetes or have some risk factors, your doctor may choose to test and monitor you for diabetes, or prediabetes, which is the precursor to type 2 diabetes.

- The first and most common test is a fasting blood sugar test. For this, you must fast overnight – usually at least eight hours – and then have blood drawn in your doctor’s office or a laboratory.
- The other option, although infrequently used, is a glucose tolerance test. You will be required to fast overnight. The next morning, your doctor will take a baseline plasma glucose test then give you a dose of glucose, usually in the form of a sweet tasting drink. Blood samples are then taken over a period of hours to measure the glucose levels in your blood.
- The third and simplest diagnostic test is the A1C test. This is a straightforward blood test, and there is no need to fast beforehand.

If your doctor confirms you have diabetes, you may experience many different emotions and stress.

According to the American Diabetes Association, how you perceive this diagnosis will greatly affect how successfully your diabetes is managed. Here are a few recommendations:

- **Learn to laugh.** Your thoughts and feelings have an enormous impact on your body. Positive thoughts do have positive physical effects.
- **Focus on positives.** Having diabetes stinks, but it can be managed.
- **You are more than diabetes.** It's just a small part of your complex being.

When it comes to diabetes, your treatment plan starts with being mentally prepared. You can then go forward

Notes:

COMPLICATIONS OF DIABETES

People with diabetes are at an increased risk for developing many serious health problems. These include:

- Eye complications, particularly disorders of the retina, and a higher risk of blindness.
- Hearing loss, with the most common type being “sensorineural hearing loss.” The National Institute of Health has found that hearing loss is twice as common in people with diabetes. It usually can’t be cured, but most cases can be treated with hearing aids.
- Foot problems are very common in people with diabetes. Nerve damage, called neuropathy, causes pain, but can also lessen the ability to feel pain, heat, and cold resulting in foot injuries. Poor circulation, very dry skin, calluses and ulcers on the feet are other complications of diabetes. If neglected, ulcers can result in infections, which can result in loss of a limb.
- Another complication is high blood pressure. This raises the risk for heart attack, stroke, eye problems, and kidney disease.
- High blood sugar can also overwork the kidneys, leading to kidney failure. Once the kidneys stop working properly, replacement therapy via dialysis or transplant is necessary.
- In addition to the retinopathy and neuropathy mentioned above, diabetes can cause other nerve damage such as autonomic neuropathy, which affects the nerves of the digestive system, urinary tract, and heart and blood vessels.

According to the American Diabetes Association, with correct treatment and recommended lifestyle changes, many people with diabetes are able to prevent or delay the onset of complications. However, the best bet is to manage diabetes carefully to prevent problems in the first place.

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MANAGING DIABETES

There are a number of things that you can do to help manage your diabetes:

- People with diabetes have the same nutritional needs as anyone else. Eating well-balanced meals is the main goal.
- Exercise is also an important component of managing your diabetes. If you're not active, get active. And if you are active, stay active. Exercise not only helps you manage your diabetes, but can also stave off complications such as heart disease and high blood pressure.
- Checking your blood glucose levels each day and logging the results can help you determine if your diabetes management plan is working.
- Also, have your doctor do an A1C blood test at least twice per year, which looks at your glucose levels over a 2-3 month period.

While a healthy diet and exercise can help those with type 2 manage their diabetes, there are many who need medications to help keep blood glucose levels down. Oral medications are often used in those more recently diagnosed.

Insulin is required for people with type 1 and sometimes necessary for people with type 2 diabetes. Most people take their insulin around meals, but some type 2's only need one injection a day. With the help of your health care team, you can find an insulin routine that will keep your blood glucose levels under control.

While controlling blood glucose and high blood pressure helps prevent this, sometimes kidneys get damaged so badly that they no longer work. When kidneys fail, one option is a kidney transplant. For those with type 1 diabetes there are also pancreas transplants.

The good news is that with a proper management plan, you can control your diabetes and feel healthy.

Notes:

TAKING ACTION

There are a number of things you can do to prevent diabetes or reduce your chances of getting the disease. And, if you are diagnosed with diabetes, it doesn't mean a life sentence of poor health. With a proper management plan, you can live a normal, active lifestyle and avoid complications.

Think about your next steps, and how you can create your own action plan:

1. The things that I can do now to help prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes are:
2. Resources I need to search or meet with to learn more about the symptoms and possible complications of diabetes are:
3. The actions that I will take right away if I suspect that my loved one has diabetes or prediabetes are:

Action plan:

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