Health Basics A-Z

Diabetes

What is diabetes?
Diabetes is a disease that results when the body doesn't produce enough insulin or the cells are unable to use it. Insulin is a hormone made by cells in the pancreas that cells use process glucose (a form of sugar) for energy. When this happens, the body is unable to properly use and store glucose, resulting in the elevated blood sugar levels.

Excess glucose in the blood can lead to severe health problems, or even death, if left untreated. For example, high blood sugar can damage the vessels that supply blood to our vital organs. In turn, this raises the risk of stroke, heart and kidney disease, eye problems and nerve disorders. Serious diabetes-related nerve disorders can affect the feet and lead to amputation of the lower limbs. What's more, complications from diabetes can also result in nerve disorders that may cause digestive problems and erectile dysfunction.

Are there different types of diabetes?
There are three main types of diabetes: type 1, type 2 and gestational diabetes. In type 1 diabetes, the body doesn't make insulin due to destruction of insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. It typically arises during childhood.

Type 2 diabetes, the most common form of the disease, usually arises later in life. While the body still produces some insulin, cells are unable to use it for energy, a condition known as insulin resistance.

Gestational diabetes affects women during pregnancy, usually around their 24th week.

Who gets diabetes?
In general, type 1 diabetes occurs most often in kids, but the disease can happen at any age. Type 1 diabetes is also more common among whites than nonwhites. In contrast, type 2 diabetes occurs more often in older people. It is often

accompanied by abdominal fat accumulation, high blood pressure and abnormal blood fat levels (collectively known as metabolic syndrome). Type 2 diabates is more common among African Americans, Latinos, American Indians and some Asian Americans, as well as Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders.

What are the symptoms of diabetes?

The symptoms of type 1 and type 2 are generally similar, but some people with type 2 diabetes display milder signs that may go unnoticed. Diabetes may be preceded by mild symptoms and lab test abnormalities known as prediabetes.

Your doctor can test you for diabetes by measuring blood glucose. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends screening for prediabetes and type 2 diabetes in people with overweight or obesity starting at age 35.

Typically, the symptoms of diabetes include:

- Frequent urination
- Extreme thirst
- Extreme hunger
- Weight gain or unintended weight loss
- Fatigue, or feelings of tiredness or listlessness
- Irritability
- Blurry vision
- Cuts and bruises that are slow to heal
- Numbness or tingling, particularly in the hands and feet
- Itchy skin
- Skin and yeast infections
- Gum infections and gum disease
- Sexual dysfunction in men

See your doctor if you have one or more of these symptoms.

What are the risk factors for diabetes?
The main risk factor for type 1 diabetes is having family members who have the disease. According to the American Diabetes Association, anyone whose mother, father, sister or brother had type 1 diabetes should get screened for the disease. In addition, you're at risk for type 1 diabetes if you have a history of injury or disease involving the pancreas. Type 1 diabetes may develop after a bacterial or viral infection.

The most common risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes include being overweight or obesity and older age 45, as well as having high blood pressure, a sedentary lifestyle, polycystic ovary syndrome, a history of diabetes during pregnancy or family members who have the disease.

What are the tests for diabetes?

A battery of blood sugar tests screen for type 1 and type 2 diabetes. These include the glycated hemoglobin (A1C) test, random blood sugar test, fasting blood sugar test and oral glucose tolerance test. Tests for gestational diabetes are performed after a doctor’s evaluation of risk factors for this type of diabetes. Commonly used screening tests to check for diabetes during pregnancy include the initial glucose challenge test and the follow-up glucose tolerance test.

What are the treatment options for diabetes?

Common recommendations for treating diabetes include eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular physical activity and monitoring your blood sugar. Most people with type 1 diabetes require insulin administered via daily injections or an insulin pump. People with pre-diabetes or type 2 diabetes may be treated with various oral medications, though some may require insulin injections.

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