



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQ142

WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Diabetes and Women

- **What is diabetes?**
- **What are the types of diabetes?**
- **What are risk factors for diabetes?**
- **What are the symptoms of diabetes?**
- **What tests are available to detect diabetes?**
- **If diabetes is not controlled, what problems can it lead to?**
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### What is diabetes?

**Diabetes mellitus** is a disease in which the body does not make enough **insulin** or does not use it as it should. Insulin is a **hormone** that helps balance the amount of **glucose** in your blood.

Normally, your body changes most of the food you eat into glucose. Glucose is then carried to the body's **cells** with the help of insulin. If your body does not make enough insulin, or the insulin does not work as it should, the glucose cannot enter the body's cells. Instead, it stays in the blood. This makes your blood glucose level too high.

### What are the types of diabetes?

There are two types of diabetes: type 1 and type 2. A person with type 1 diabetes needs to take insulin to survive because the body makes little or no insulin on its own. In people with type 2 diabetes, insulin is produced, but it does not work as it should. The body becomes resistant to the effects of insulin and produces more insulin to keep glucose levels normal. Over time, the body cannot maintain high enough levels to keep the glucose levels normal, and diabetes occurs. Type 2 diabetes also may occur as a result of other diseases or as a side effect of certain medications.

People with type 2 diabetes may not need to take insulin. They may be able to control their glucose levels with proper diet, medication, or both.

### What are risk factors for diabetes?

Diabetes may run in families or be linked to certain lifestyle factors. You should be tested if you have any of these risk factors:

- Age 45 years or older
- Overweight
- Family history of diabetes
- Physical inactivity
- Ethnic background:
  - Native American
  - Asian
  - Hispanic
  - African American
  - Pacific Islander

- Previous abnormal glucose screening results
- **High blood pressure**
- High **cholesterol**
- History of **gestational diabetes** or a baby weighing more than 9 pounds at birth
- **Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)**
- History of **cardiovascular disease**

### What are the symptoms of diabetes?

The symptoms of type 1 and type 2 diabetes are listed as follows:

Type 1 diabetes

- Increased thirst or urination
- Constant hunger
- Weight loss without trying
- Blurred vision
- Extreme fatigue

Type 2 diabetes

- Any symptoms of type 1 diabetes
- Sores that are slow to heal
- Dry, itchy skin
- Loss of feeling or tingling in feet
- Infections, such as a **yeast infection**, that keep coming back

### What tests are available to detect diabetes?

There are three types of tests used to diagnose diabetes:

1. Fasting plasma glucose test—This is the easiest and most common way to test for diabetes. Before the test, you must fast (not eat or drink anything but water) for at least 8 hours. One sample of blood is obtained.
2. Random, also called casual, plasma glucose test—Your health care professional may screen you when you are not fasting by measuring your glucose levels.
3. Oral glucose tolerance test—Before you have this test, you must fast overnight. You will first have a fasting plasma glucose test. Next, you will drink a liquid that contains glucose. Blood samples are taken to measure your blood glucose level over several hours.

### If diabetes is not controlled, what problems can it lead to?

If diabetes is not controlled, long-term, severe health problems may occur:

- **Kidney disease** that can lead to high blood pressure or kidney failure
- Eye problems that can lead to blindness
- Nerve damage and blood vessel damage in the feet that can cause pain, numbness, infection, and possibly the need to remove a toe, foot, or leg
- High blood cholesterol levels that can lead to **stroke** and heart disease
- Certain infections, such as **bladder** or kidney infections, vaginal infections, yeast infections, and skin infections
- Problems in pregnancy
- Thyroid problems

### How can women with diabetes prepare for pregnancy?

If you have diabetes, preparing for pregnancy can improve your health and that of your future child (see FAQ176 “A Healthy Pregnancy for Women With Diabetes”). Plan to see your health care professional before you get pregnant to discuss your care. You should try to have good control over your glucose level a number of weeks before you become pregnant. Your health care professional may suggest changes in your care that will help lower your glucose to a normal range.

### Can diabetes be prevented?

To help prevent diabetes, follow a healthy diet and get regular exercise (see FAQ064 “Weight Control: Eating Right and Keeping Fit”). This also can help keep your weight down—a key part of preventing diabetes. The following steps can help prevent the disease:

- Keep your weight in the range that is healthy for you.
- Eat a well-balanced diet to help keep your cholesterol, **blood pressure**, and weight at a healthy level. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s website “MyPlate” ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) can help you plan a balanced diet.
- Try to exercise for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week.

## Glossary

**Bladder:** A hollow, muscular organ in which urine is stored.

**Blood Pressure:** A measure of how hard blood is pressing against artery walls.

**Cardiovascular Disease:** Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

**Cells:** The smallest units of a structure in the body. Cells are the building blocks for all parts of the body.

**Cholesterol:** A natural substance that is a building block for cells and hormones. This substance helps carry fat through the blood vessels for use or storage in other parts of the body.

**Diabetes Mellitus:** A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

**Gestational Diabetes:** Diabetes that starts during pregnancy.

**Glucose:** A sugar in the blood that is the body’s main source of fuel.

**High Blood Pressure:** Blood pressure above the normal level. Also called hypertension.

**Hormone:** A substance made in the body that controls the function of cells or organs.

**Insulin:** A hormone that lowers the levels of glucose (sugar) in the blood.

**Kidney Disease:** A general term for any disease that affects how the kidneys function.

**Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS):** A condition that leads to a hormone imbalance that affects a woman’s monthly menstrual periods, ovulation, ability to get pregnant, and metabolism.

**Stroke:** A sudden interruption of blood flow to all or part of the brain, caused by blockage or bursting of a blood vessel in the brain. A stroke often results in loss of consciousness and temporary or permanent paralysis.

**Yeast Infection:** An infection caused by an overgrowth of a fungus. Symptoms may include itching, burning, and irritation of the vulva or vagina and a thick, white discharge.

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ142:** This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women’s health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician’s independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) to ensure accuracy.

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