



Patient education: Type 2 diabetes (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is type 2 diabetes?

Type 2 diabetes is a disorder that disrupts the way your body uses sugar. It is sometimes called type 2 diabetes mellitus.

All the cells in your body need sugar to work normally. Sugar gets into the cells with the help of a hormone called insulin. Insulin is made by the pancreas, an organ in the belly. If there is not enough insulin, or if your body stops responding to insulin, sugar builds up in the blood. That is what happens to people with diabetes.

There are two different types of diabetes:

- Type 1 diabetes – In type 1 diabetes, the pancreas does not make insulin or makes very little insulin.
- Type 2 diabetes – In most people with type 2 diabetes, the body stops responding to insulin normally. Then, over time, the pancreas stops making enough insulin.

Being overweight or obese increases a person's risk of developing type 2 diabetes. But people who are not overweight can get diabetes, too.

What are the symptoms of type 2 diabetes?

Type 2 diabetes usually causes no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they include:

- Needing to urinate often
- Intense thirst
- Blurry vision

Can diabetes lead to other health problems?

Yes. Type 2 diabetes might not make you feel sick. But if it is not managed, it can lead to serious problems over time, such as:

- Heart attacks
- Strokes
- Kidney disease
- Vision problems (or even blindness)
- Pain or loss of feeling in the hands and feet
- Needing to have fingers, toes, or other body parts removed (amputated)

How do I know if I have type 2 diabetes?

To find out if you have type 2 diabetes, your doctor or nurse can do a blood test. There are 2 tests that can be used for this. Both involve measuring the amount of sugar in your blood, called your "blood sugar" or "blood glucose":

- One of the tests measures your blood sugar at the time the blood sample is taken. This test is done in the morning. You can't eat or drink anything except water for at least 8 hours before the test.
- The other test shows what your **average** blood sugar has been for the past 2 to 3 months. This blood test is called "hemoglobin A1C" or just "A1C." It can be checked at any time of the day, even if you have recently eaten.

How is type 2 diabetes treated?

The goals of treatment are to control your blood sugar and lower the risk of future problems that can happen in people with diabetes. An important part of managing diabetes is to eat healthy foods and get plenty of physical activity.

There are a few medicines that help control blood sugar. Some people need to take pills that help the body make more insulin or that help insulin do its job. Others need insulin shots.

Depending on what medicines you take, you might need to check your blood sugar regularly at home. But not everyone with type 2 diabetes needs to do this. Your doctor or nurse will tell you if you should be checking your blood sugar, and when and how to do this.

Sometimes, people with type 2 diabetes also need medicines to reduce the problems caused by the disease. For instance, medicines used to lower blood pressure can reduce the chances of a heart attack or stroke.

It's also important to get certain vaccines, such as vaccines to protect against the flu and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Some people also need a vaccine to prevent pneumonia.

Can type 2 diabetes be prevented?

Yes. To lower your chances of getting type 2 diabetes, the most important thing you can do is eat a healthy diet and get plenty of physical activity. This can help you lose weight if you are overweight. But eating well and being active are also good for your overall health. Even gentle activity, like walking, has benefits.

If you smoke, quitting can also lower your risk of type 2 diabetes. Quitting smoking can be hard to do, but your doctor or nurse can help.

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