

Diabetes: Frequently Asked Questions

A person just diagnosed with diabetes must learn a lot of information quickly to better understand and manage the disease. Here are answers to some common questions about diabetes that may help ease your mind.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes mellitus, the disease's full name, is a condition in which the body either does not produce insulin or cannot use it properly. Insulin is a hormone that enables cells to convert sugar, starches and other foods into energy. In diabetes, blood sugar is at abnormally high levels because cells don't absorb enough insulin.

What are the different types of diabetes?

In type 1 diabetes, the body cannot produce insulin. Patients must inject insulin daily to stay alive. In the more common type 2, the body either does not make enough insulin or does not use it properly. Gestational diabetes, which occurs in about 4 percent of pregnancies, is a temporary disease. But women who've had it are at greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Most people who develop type 2 diabetes first have a condition known as pre-diabetes, in which blood glucose levels are higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed as full-blown diabetes.

Who gets diabetes?

Type 1 usually starts in childhood or young adulthood. Type 2, which accounts for an estimated 90 percent to 95 percent of diabetes cases, is most common in people older than 40. However, it is becoming more prevalent in younger age groups and is no longer considered an adult-only disease. Certain ethnic groups – African Americans, nonwhite Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders and Native Americans – are more prone to type 2 diabetes than Caucasians. Caucasians have a higher incidence of type 1. Risk factors for type 2 include being overweight, having a family history of diabetes and lack of exercise. Family history also is a factor in type 1.

What happens if diabetes goes uncontrolled?

Complications include blindness, kidney disease, nerve disease and amputation, heart disease and stroke.

How big a public health problem is diabetes?

An estimated 23.8 million Americans have diabetes. About 7 million of these do not yet know they have the disease. Diabetes accounts for more than 230,000 deaths each year, either as an identified cause or through complications. Type 2 diabetes is rapidly increasing because of the aging of the population and Americans' increasingly sedentary lifestyle. Also, an estimated 79 million people in the U.S. have pre-diabetes.

What is the treatment for diabetes?

Treatment aims to keep blood glucose near normal levels, and self-management plays a crucial role. Type 1 diabetes requires a strict regimen, which typically includes a carefully calculated diet, planned physical activity, home blood glucose testing several times a day and multiple daily insulin injections. Treatment of type 2 diabetes typically includes diet control, exercise, home blood glucose testing and often oral medication and/or insulin.

Can diabetes be prevented?

Studies have shown that regular exercise can reduce the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, which also seems to be associated with obesity.

Is there a cure for diabetes?

No, but scientists are working on several approaches that might produce a cure, including pancreas transplantation, transplanting of islet cells (which produce insulin), artificial pancreas development and genetic manipulation.