



NHS Tayside Diabetes Managed Clinical Network Patient Information Leaflet

Your Guide to Diabetes

Who gets diabetes and what causes it?

Diabetes Mellitus is a common health condition. About 1.4 million people in the UK are known to have diabetes. That is about three in every 100 people. Almost 9 out of 10 people with diabetes have Type 2 diabetes.

Diabetes is a condition in which the amount of glucose or sugar in the blood is too high. This is because the body cannot use it properly. Insulin is vital for life. It is a hormone produced by the pancreas that helps glucose to enter cells where it is used as fuel by the body. Glucose comes from the digestion of starchy foods such as bread, rice, potatoes, chapattis, yams and plantain and from sugar and other sweet foods. It also comes from the liver, which makes glucose.

Type 1 diabetes

Type 1 diabetes develops much more quickly, usually over a few weeks, and symptoms are normally very obvious. The condition develops when the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas have been destroyed. Nobody knows for sure why these cells have been damaged. The most likely cause is an abnormal reaction of the body to the cells.

It is treated by insulin injections, diet and regular exercise.

Type 1 diabetes can be triggered by a viral or other infection. This type of diabetes generally affects younger people but can happen at any age

Type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes used to be called 'maturity onset' diabetes because it usually appears in middle-aged or elderly people. However it does occasionally appear in younger people.

Type 2 diabetes develops slowly and the symptoms are usually less severe. Some people may not notice any symptoms at all and their diabetes is only picked up in a routine medical check up.

Some people may put the symptoms down to getting older or overwork. The body no longer responds normally to its own insulin, known as insulin resistance, or the body does not produce enough insulin.

People who are overweight are more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes. It tends to run in families and is more common in South Asian and African-Caribbean communities.

Type 2 diabetes is treated by diet and exercise alone or by diet, exercise and tablets or by diet, exercise and insulin injections.

The aim of treatment for Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes is to achieve blood sugar and blood pressure levels as near to normal as possible. Along with a healthy lifestyle this will help to improve wellbeing. It will also protect against long-term damage to the eyes, kidneys, nerves, heart and major arteries.

Common Myth

Some people wrongly describe Type 2 diabetes as mild diabetes. There is no such thing as mild diabetes. All diabetes should be taken seriously and treated properly. Diabetes UK publishes a free 'Are you at risk?' leaflet in English and various other languages.

Other causes of diabetes

There are some other causes of diabetes, including certain diseases of the pancreas, but they are all very rare. Sometimes an accident or an illness may reveal diabetes if it is already there, but they do not cause it.

Symptoms of Diabetes

The main symptoms of diabetes are

- Increased thirst
- Going to the toilet all the time - especially at night
- Extreme tiredness
- Weight loss
- Genital itching or regular episodes of thrush
- Blurred vision.

Although diabetes cannot be cured, it can be treated very successfully. Knowing why people with diabetes develop high blood sugar levels will help you to understand how some of the treatments work.

Glucose comes from the ingestion of sugary or starchy foods. If someone has diabetes they have high levels of glucose (sugar) circulating in their blood stream that isn't used by cells or turned into energy, this is why people with untreated diabetes often feel tired. The unused glucose passes into the urine, pulling water with it. This is why people with untreated diabetes pass large amounts of urine and are extremely thirsty.

People with untreated diabetes may also lose weight because fat tissue and protein, mainly from muscle, are broken down as an alternative energy source.

Reducing the risk of serious health problems

People with diabetes have a higher chance of developing certain serious health problems such as heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, circulation problems, nerve damage, and damage to the kidneys and eyes. The risk is particularly high for people with diabetes who are also very overweight, who smoke or who are not physically active.

You will greatly reduce your risk of developing any of these complications by controlling your blood sugar and blood pressure levels, and by eating healthily and doing regular physical activity.

Regular medical check-ups

In the last 10 to 20 years, the care for people with diabetes has improved dramatically. One of the most important developments has been improved methods of screening which will help your doctor to pick up any health problems at an early stage so they can be treated more successfully. This is why having regular medical check-ups is important.

Help yourself to stay fit and healthy

If you have diabetes, you will have to make some changes to your way of life. However, by sticking to your treatment, monitoring your condition and following a generally healthy lifestyle, you should be able to continue your normal, day-to-day life and take part in the activities you have always enjoyed.

Smoking

If you smoke - Quit Now.

Smoking is particularly dangerous for people with diabetes as it greatly increases the chance of developing a serious health problem. If you smoke, it is very important that you quit now.

Some Other Useful Information

Special "Diabetic" foods are not recommended. They are expensive and may cause diarrhoea.

Prescriptions are only free of charge if you are on tablets or insulin for your diabetes. Prescription exemption forms can be obtained from your GP.

Everyone with diabetes is legally obliged to inform their insurance company that they have diabetes. Otherwise your policy may not be valid.

You need to inform the DVLA if you are on insulin or certain tablets for your diabetes.

For further information see leaflet "Diabetes and Driving" available from your diabetes team or at www.diabetes-healthnet.ac.uk in the patient information section.

Other Tayside patient information leaflets are available on a wide range of topics on www.diabetes-healthnet.ac.uk.

Diabetes UK

Diabetes UK can provide information and advice on all aspects of diabetes. Contact the Diabetes UK Scotland Careline on Tel 0845 120 2960 or carelinescotland@diabetes.org.uk.

There are local Diabetes UK Support Groups in Dundee, Angus and Perth & Kinross. Further information about where and when these are held can be found on www.diabetes-healthnet.ac.uk in the Patient Information Section.

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