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Diabetes in Older People

[Español](#)

Diabetes is a serious disease that affects many older adults. Diabetes occurs when a person's blood glucose, also called blood sugar, is too high. The good news is that you can take steps to delay or prevent type 2 diabetes, which is the most common form of the disease to develop in older adults. If you already have diabetes, there are ways to manage the condition and help prevent diabetes-related health problems.

What is diabetes?

Glucose is the body's main source of energy. Our bodies can make glucose, and glucose also comes from the food we eat. To use glucose as energy, the body needs insulin, a hormone that helps glucose get into cells. If you have diabetes, your body may not make enough insulin, use insulin in the right way, or both. That can cause too much glucose to stay in the blood, which can cause health problems over time.



Types of diabetes

The main types of diabetes in older adults are type 1 and type 2:

- **Type 1 diabetes:** In this form of diabetes, the body makes little or no insulin. Although older adults can develop type 1 diabetes, it begins most often in children and young adults, who then have diabetes for life. People with type 1 diabetes need to take insulin every day.
- **Type 2 diabetes:** In this condition, the most common form of diabetes, the body's cells don't use insulin properly. It occurs most often in middle-aged and older adults, but it can also affect children. Your chance of developing type 2 diabetes is higher if you have risk factors such as overweight or obesity, an inactive lifestyle, a family history of diabetes, or a history of gestational diabetes (a type of diabetes that develops during pregnancy).

People who are African American, American Indian, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, or Pacific Islander also have a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes than people from other backgrounds.

Prediabetes is a condition that occurs when glucose levels are higher than normal but not high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes. Millions of older Americans have prediabetes. Although people with prediabetes have a greater chance of developing type 2 diabetes, there are ways to help prevent or delay the disease. These include maintaining a healthy weight, exercising, having your glucose level checked regularly, and talking with your doctor about medications and lifestyle changes that may help reduce your risk.

Symptoms of diabetes

Symptoms of diabetes may include [feeling tired](#), increased hunger or thirst, losing weight without trying, urinating often, and numbness or tingling in hands or feet. You may also get blurred vision and skin infections, and your body may heal more slowly from cuts and bruises.

In people with type 2 diabetes, symptoms often develop slowly and may go unnoticed for a long time. Some people with type 2 diabetes have no symptoms, and they only find out that they have the condition when other diabetes-related health problems develop.

Sometimes older adults dismiss the symptoms of diabetes as just part of “getting old,” but they can be signs of a serious problem. [Talk with your doctor](#) if you have any symptoms or are concerned about developing diabetes.

Tests for diabetes

If you have symptoms or risk factors for diabetes, it’s important to get tested. Getting an early diagnosis can help you manage your diabetes and may prevent health problems. Doctors use several blood tests to help diagnose diabetes:

- The **fasting plasma glucose test** measures your blood glucose at a single point in time. Most of the time, your doctor will give you the test in the morning after you have fasted (had nothing to eat or drink except water) for at least eight hours.
- The **A1C test** shows your average blood glucose level over the past three months. You can eat and drink before this test. The A1C test may not be accurate in people with certain other diseases and conditions, so your doctor may use other tests in addition to A1C to diagnose diabetes.
- The **random plasma glucose test** also measures your blood glucose at a single point in time. It is given at any time during the day and does not require fasting.
- The **oral glucose tolerance test** has two steps: first, your blood glucose level is tested after you have fasted overnight. Then you drink a sugary drink and have your blood glucose level tested again two hours later. If your glucose level is high, you may have diabetes.

If a blood test suggests you have diabetes, your doctor may do a second blood test to confirm the diagnosis.

Managing type 2 diabetes

A person with diabetes may need to manage the disease with lifestyle changes, medication, or both. Many people with type 2 diabetes can manage their blood glucose levels with diet and exercise alone. Others may need [diabetes pills or insulin injections](#), along with medicines to manage other conditions like [high blood pressure](#) and [high cholesterol](#). Ask your health care provider questions about your medications to make sure you understand how they work, how to take them, and what side effects may occur.

Diabetes and brain health

If you have diabetes, your doctor may screen you for [depression](#) or [cognitive impairment](#). Older adults with diabetes are at higher risk for these conditions compared to others their age who do not have diabetes. Having depression or cognitive impairment can make diabetes self-care challenging.

Managing your diabetes involves taking care of yourself each day. Your daily self-care plan to control your blood glucose may include:

- **Tracking your glucose levels.** Very high blood glucose levels (called hyperglycemia) or very low blood glucose levels (called hypoglycemia) can put your health at risk. Your plan will show how often you should check your glucose and how often to get the A1C test. If you are managing your diabetes without taking insulin, you may not need to check your glucose as often.
- **Making healthy food choices.** The food you eat affects blood glucose levels, so it's important to learn what's best for you to eat, [how much](#), and when. Work with your health care team to manage your weight and to lose weight if necessary.
- **Being active.** Walking and other [forms of daily exercise](#) can help improve glucose levels in older people with diabetes. Set a goal to be active most days of the week and create a fitness plan that fits your schedule and abilities. Your health care team can help.
- **Taking your medicines.** You should [take medicines as prescribed](#) even when you feel good. Tell your doctor if you have any side effects or cannot afford your medicines. Also, let your doctor know if you have trouble taking your medicines or [keeping track of your medication schedule](#).

Diabetes can affect many parts of your body. If diabetes is untreated or poorly managed, it can cause serious health problems over time, such as damage to the eyes, kidneys, nerves, feet, and heart. People with type 2 diabetes may also be at greater risk for [cancer](#), depression, and [dementia](#). Here are more strategies to stay as healthy as possible with diabetes:

- **Manage your blood pressure.** Get your [blood pressure](#) checked often. High blood pressure increases the risk for heart disease and can damage the eyes and kidneys.
- **Manage your cholesterol.** At least once a year, get a blood test to check your cholesterol and triglyceride levels. High levels may increase your risk for heart problems.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking raises your risk for many health problems, including heart attack and stroke. If you smoke, [take steps to quit](#).
- **Have yearly eye exams.** Finding and treating eye problems early can help [keep your eyes healthy](#).
- **Check your kidneys yearly.** Because diabetes can affect your kidneys, getting recommended urine and blood tests will show if your kidneys are healthy.

- **Get flu shots every year and the pneumonia vaccine.** A yearly flu shot will help keep you healthy. If you're over 65, make sure you have had the [pneumonia](#) vaccine. If you were younger than 65 when you had the pneumonia vaccine, you may need another one. Ask your doctor.
- **Care for your teeth and gums.** Brush your teeth and floss daily. Have your [teeth and gums](#) checked twice a year by a dentist to avoid serious problems.
- **Protect your skin.** Keep your skin clean and use skin moisturizers for [dryness](#). Take care of minor cuts and bruises to prevent infections.
- **Check your feet.** Keep your feet clean by washing them every day and help protect your feet from damage by wearing shoes and socks at all times. Take time to look at your feet every day for any red patches. Ask someone else to check your feet if you can't. If you have sores, blisters, breaks in the skin, infections, or calluses, see a foot doctor, called a podiatrist.
- **Keep up with cancer screenings.** Ask your doctor which screenings to get based on your age, gender, and other risk factors.
- **Be prepared.** Ensure you always have several days' worth of supplies on hand for testing and treating your diabetes in case of an emergency.
- **Talk with your doctor about your concerns.** If you think you might need help with your management plan, are depressed, are worried about your memory, or have any other concerns, talk with your doctor. There may be ways to help.

When you visit your health care team, your providers will assess how well you are managing your diabetes. Your care plan may change, or you may need more information and support. A change in health, such as a new diagnosis or complication, or a change in care, such as going home from the hospital, may also lead to updates to your plan.

Help with diabetes costs

Both private health insurance and government programs (such as [Medicare](#), [Medicaid](#), and [veterans' health care](#)) may help pay for the cost of diabetes care. If you are choosing a health insurance plan or trying to understand your coverage better, ask for a Summary of Benefits and Coverage, which explains the coverage in plain language. It can help you find out how much the plan pays for diabetes medications, supplies and devices (such as an insulin pump,) and visits to see medical specialists. You can also learn about the copayments and deductibles you'll need to pay out of pocket.

Don't hesitate to tell your health care team if you have trouble paying for your diabetes medicines and supplies. Ask if there are less expensive options or generic versions of the medicines you need for managing diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or other medical conditions.

Learn about other ways to [help pay for diabetes medications](#)

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- Watching a video about [type 2 diabetes](#)
- Viewing and sharing an infographic with [tips for choosing healthier foods](#)

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For more information about diabetes

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK)

800-860-8747

866-569-1162 (TTY)

healthinfo@niddk.nih.gov

www.niddk.nih.gov

Smokefree60+

National Cancer Institute

877-448-7848

(877-44U-QUIT)

cancergovstaff@mail.nih.gov

www.60plus.smokefree.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

800-232-4636

888-232-6348 (TTY)

cdcinfo@cdc.gov

www.cdc.gov

Medicare

800-633-4227

877-486-2048 (TTY)

www.cms.gov

www.medicare.gov

American Diabetes Association

800-342-2383

askada@diabetes.org

www.diabetes.org

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