

Diabetes

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Diabetes is a long-term (chronic) condition caused by too much glucose (sugar) in the blood. In the UK, diabetes affects approximately 2.3 million people, and it's thought there are at least half a million more people who have the condition but are not aware of it.

How does diabetes occur?

Normally, the amount of sugar in the blood is controlled by a hormone called insulin, which is produced by the pancreas (a gland behind the stomach). When food is digested and enters the bloodstream, insulin moves any glucose out of the blood and into cells, where it is broken down to produce energy. However, when a person has diabetes, their body is unable to break down glucose into energy.

There are two types of diabetes - Type 1 and Type 2, and these are discussed below.

Type 1 Diabetes

Type 1 diabetes is often referred to as insulin-dependent diabetes and develops if the body is unable to produce any insulin. This type of diabetes can start at any age but usually occurs before the age of 40, often in the teenage years.

Type 2 Diabetes

Type 2 diabetes develops when the body still has the ability to make some insulin, but not enough, or when the insulin that is produced does not work properly ("insulin resistance"). Type 2 diabetes is the most common type and accounts for more than 80% of all diabetes cases and is generally linked with being overweight. Type 2 diabetes is more common in older people than Type 1 diabetes.

Advice and medication

As with other common illnesses, sufferers can help themselves by stopping smoking, losing weight and taking more exercise. It is very important to have regular (annual) check-ups with your doctor to detect the onset of any of the potential complications and ensure early treatment. Treatment is based on reducing blood sugar levels in combination with reducing risk factors for heart attacks and strokes. People suffering from Type 1 diabetes will need insulin injections to treat their condition.

What if my blood sugar is raised?

Your blood sugar levels naturally vary throughout the day; high after meals (very high after a sugar intake) and lower when you have not eaten for some time. Blood glucose levels vary from person to person, therefore, there is no such thing as an 'ideal' blood glucose level.

Although it is possible to do a home test where a small drop of blood is taken from a finger, **diabetes can only be diagnosed after a blood test with blood taken from a vein in your arm.** For testing purposes, blood glucose levels are usually measured in terms of how many millimoles (mmol/l) of glucose there is in a litre of blood. Blood sugar should be below 6mmol/l before breakfast, below 7.1 before a meal and below 11.1mmol/l a couple of hours after a meal. If you conduct a home test and result is high then you should attend your own surgery for a proper blood test. It is important to let your surgery know why you have requested a blood test so that they can provide instructions regarding any preparations required prior to the test being conducted.