

Healthy Living: Diabetes ¹

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What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a condition in which the body has difficulty making or using insulin. Insulin is a hormone that controls the amount of glucose (sugar) in our blood. When a person has diabetes, the body makes no insulin, too little insulin, or the insulin it makes does not work right. This results in high blood glucose.

What happens if my blood glucose is high?

Over time, high blood glucose can lead to vision loss or even blindness. It also can harm your kidneys, blood vessels, and nerves. People with diabetes have a higher chance of developing high blood pressure, which can lead to heart disease.



Figure 1. People with diabetes are at high risk for high blood pressure. Credits: monkeybusinessimages/iStock/Thinkstock.com

Am I at risk for diabetes?

Factors that may increase your risk of developing diabetes are:

- **Family history**—If one of your parents, grandparents, or siblings had or has diabetes, you are more likely to have the disease.
- **Age**—Risk for diabetes increases as you age.
- **Race/ethnicity**—If you are Hispanic, African American, American Indian, or Asian American, you are at increased risk of developing diabetes.
- **Gestational diabetes**—If you had diabetes while you were pregnant or if you gave birth to a baby weighing nine pounds or more, you have a greater risk of developing diabetes later in life.
- **Obesity**—Having excess body fat increases your chance of developing diabetes.

What is a healthy weight for me?

Adults with a large amount of body fat, especially around their waist, are at risk for obesity-related diseases such as diabetes. An easy way to assess your weight is to measure your waist circumference. Use a tape measure placed around your bare abdomen just above your hip bone. Do not pull on the tape measure, but make sure it is snug around your waist. A man with a waist greater than 40 inches or a non-pregnant woman with a waist greater than 35 inches is at high risk for developing diabetes and other obesity-related diseases.

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For more specific information on obesity and health risks, see the CDC website at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/index.html>.

How do I know if I have diabetes?

Close to 30 million Americans have diabetes, and about one-fourth of them do not know it. People with diabetes may have various symptoms. They may experience all, some, or none of the following:

- A need to urinate often (even at night)
- Constant thirst or hunger
- Weight loss that cannot be explained
- Dry or itchy skin
- Skin infections
- Slow healing of cuts
- Numbness or tingling in feet or hands
- Blurry vision

A doctor can determine if you have diabetes. If you have any of the above symptoms, visit your doctor and find out. The sooner you know that you have diabetes, the sooner you can take charge of your condition. This will help you feel better and lower your risk for health complications.

Can diabetes be cured?

In most cases of diabetes, there is no cure, but diabetes can be controlled. Controlling diabetes means keeping your blood glucose as close to normal as possible. Your doctor will tell you your target for blood glucose control.



Figure 2. Check your blood glucose regularly. Let your health care provider know if you need help managing your blood glucose. Credits: Fuse/Thinkstock.com

Some people can achieve their blood glucose goal with a proper diet and regular exercise. Most people with diabetes also need oral or injectable medication to reach their treatment goals. By controlling your blood glucose, you reduce your risk for health complications.

How can I control diabetes?

- Keep your blood glucose under control.
- Lose weight if you have excess body fat, especially abdominal fat.
- Be physically active every day.
- Take medications as prescribed.
- Have your eyes and your blood pressure checked regularly.
- Do not smoke!
- Have a health professional check your feet at least once a year; check them yourself every day.
- Have your teeth cleaned and checked at least twice a year.
- Follow a healthy diet.



Figure 3. Have your feet examined by a podiatrist or your primary care doctor at least once a year. Examine them yourself every day. Credits: Cathy Yeulet/Hemera/Thinkstock.com

How do I choose a healthy diet?

- Limit foods with saturated fat and avoid foods with trans fat.
- Eat lots of foods with fiber, such as whole grains, legumes, and non-starchy vegetables.

- Balance carbohydrate intake throughout the day.
- Choose a variety of healthful foods from all of the five food groups (see <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>).
- Balance energy (calorie) intake with physical activity to attain or maintain a healthy body weight.
- Limit concentrated sweets, such as sugar, honey, candy, regular soft drinks, energy drinks, and sweet tea.
- Limit foods high in salt and sodium.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, limit your intake (ask your health care provider for advice.)

If you have diabetes, a registered dietitian (RD) can design an eating plan that is right for you.



Figure 4. Eat plenty of non-starchy vegetables and other foods rich in dietary fiber as part of an overall healthful diet.

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Additional Information and Resources

Your local UF/IFAS Extension family and consumer sciences agent—Look for “Cooperative Extension Service” in your telephone book; in Florida you can find your local UF/IFAS Extension office at the UF/IFAS Extension website: <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>.

Area Agencies on Aging—These may be listed in the business section in your telephone book; in Florida find your local Area Agency on Aging at the Florida Department of Elder Affairs website: <http://elderaffairs.state.fl.us/doea/arc.php>.

American Diabetes Association—Call toll free 1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383) (available in English and Spanish). Website: <http://www.diabetes.org>.

Find a registered dietitian (RD)—You can find an RD in your area through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics at <http://www.eatright.org/programs/rdnfinder/>.