

What is Type 2 Diabetes?



Hello! I'm Dr. I. M. Livengood.

I hear your doctor just told you that you have type 2 diabetes. You are probably worried about how this will change your life. Maybe you know someone with diabetes and are scared by what you have seen. Maybe you are not even sure what diabetes is. I will try to help by telling you what I know. We will start by talking about how the “normal” (non-diabetic) body works.

In the normal body...

The foods we eat are broken down into sugar. The sugar moves from the gut into the blood. When blood sugar rises after a meal, the pancreas (a large gland behind the stomach) puts out insulin into the blood. Insulin is a hormone made only by the pancreas. Its job is to help sugar move out of the blood and into all the cells in the body. The cells need sugar for energy.

What goes wrong in diabetes?

With type 2 diabetes, the pancreas does not make enough insulin, or the insulin does not work right. The sugar cannot get out of the blood and into the cells. The blood sugar stays high, and the cells “starve.” This is what people mean when they talk about high blood sugar.

Who gets diabetes?

You may wonder why you have diabetes. Well, you are not alone. More than 16 million Americans have diabetes. Half don't even know they have it! It can happen to anyone but more often in people who:

- weigh more than they should
- are over 40 years old
- have family members with type 2 diabetes
- are not physically active

What are the symptoms of diabetes and why do they happen?

There can be many symptoms of diabetes. Some symptoms happen because the cells of the body aren't being fed, such as:

- always feeling tired or weak
- always hungry
- losing weight

Other symptoms happen because there is too much sugar in the blood. When the blood sugar is too high, the sugar “spills over” into the urine. This is how the body tries to get rid of the extra sugar. These symptoms are:

- always thirsty
- urinating often

High blood sugar can also harm blood vessels and nerves in the body. This can cause:

- numb or tingling feet
- slower healing of cuts
- blurry vision
- infections (skin, gum, bladder, vaginal)
- impotence (sexual problems)

These symptoms are “warning signs” that something is wrong.

Can diabetes cause serious problems?

Yes, people with diabetes can have many serious problems if they do not control their blood sugar. Some of these are:

- eye problems and blindness
- kidney disease
- stroke or heart attack
- foot infections (with foot and leg amputations)

The good news is there are ways to control blood sugar to help stop or slow these problems.

How is diabetes treated?

There are many ways to treat diabetes, starting with lifestyle changes.

- **Healthy eating and exercise**

To help control your blood sugar, it is very important for you to eat regular healthy meals. Your meals should include starchy foods, fruits, vegetables, low fat milk and meats, and small amounts of fat. Even some “sweet treats” can be worked in now and then. A dietitian or diabetes educator can help with a meal plan that is right for you.

Exercise will also help your blood sugars to be normal. A healthy exercise plan is one that is safe and fun for you. If you are overweight, exercise can help with weight loss. Even a small weight loss of 10 pounds may help improve your blood sugars. Be sure to see your doctor before you start an exercise program.

Remember, healthy eating and exercise are the starting points to control your diabetes.

- **Oral medicines**

If lifestyle changes aren't enough, your doctor may want to start you on an oral (by mouth) pills that can be used. All of these work in different ways to help make your blood sugar normal. Your doctor will know what pill (or pills) will work best form you.

- **Insulin**

Sometimes insulin shots are needed along with the pills. Insulin can also be used alone for good blood sugar control. This takes the place of the insulin your body is not making enough of on its own. There are several kinds of insulin that can be used. You and your doctor can work out which insulin will work best for you.

LIVING WITH DIABETES

So, those are the basic facts about diabetes. I hope I have answered some of your questions. Please remember—your diabetes can be controlled. Your doctor and health care team will help, but, you are the one who has to take charge. Good control of your diabetes means less chance of serious problems. Talk with your doctor and diabetes educator and start today to:

- eat healthy meals
- exercise regularly
- watch your weight
- take medicines your doctor prescribes
- keep your appointments for health exams and check-ups

YOU CAN DO IT...

GOOD LUCK AND GOOD LIVING!

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