



## Diabetes

Anyone, anywhere, at any age can get diabetes...could you be next?

Most people have a vague idea of what diabetes is but few understand exactly what it's all about. Put simply, diabetes is a disease that makes your body unable to produce or properly use insulin to regulate the amount of glucose or sugar in your blood. This results in abnormally high blood sugar levels, called hyperglycemia. This can be extremely dangerous, causing heart disease, nerve damage, kidney failure, blindness and amputation.

Your body is made up of millions of cells that all need energy to function properly. Glucose - sugar broken down from food you eat - provides this energy but it can only enter your cells and regulate your blood sugar level with the help of insulin, a hormone made in your pancreas.

There are two kinds of diabetes, Type 1 and Type 2. With Type 1, your body produces little or no insulin while with Type 2, your body produces insulin but it doesn't get absorbed into your cells.

**Type 1** diabetes usually develops in young people (<30 years old, most often in childhood or as teenagers) and often requires insulin therapy through administered through injections or tablets. **Type 2** occurs mostly in people over forty who are overweight and who may have high blood pressure and high cholesterol. With Type 2, the pancreas keeps on manufacturing more and more insulin but the cells remain unable to absorb it. Over the years, the pancreas may exhaust itself and stop producing insulin, which may result in the need for insulin injections.

A family history of diabetes, ageing, high blood pressure, raised cholesterol, a lack of exercise, an unhealthy diet and being overweight all raise your risk of becoming diabetic.

Diet and exercise remain the mainstay of diabetes treatment. Being diagnosed with diabetes does not mean the end of a normal, healthy life. You just need to take extra care to manage the disease effectively.

For information and advice about diabetes, contact a Kaelo Patient Manager or EAP counsellor, or visit [www.diabetessa.co.za](http://www.diabetessa.co.za).

## Living with diabetes

Diabetes sufferers can live active, healthy and satisfying lives by monitoring their blood sugar levels and by following a good diet and exercise regime. Extra care needs to be taken to eat a balanced diet.

- Eat a healthy diet to help control your blood sugar and to maintain a healthy body weight
- People who are Type 1 diabetic need to focus on matching their food intake to suit peaks and troughs in their insulin levels - they also need to know how fast their body metabolises different types of foods
- People who are Type 2 diabetic need to focus on weight loss in order to improve their body's ability to use the insulin it does produce
- Diabetics need to avoid food high in sugar (glucose, fructose, sucrose and dextrose) and also steer clear of highly processed carbohydrates (cakes, pies, pastries, etc)
- Use skimmed, fat free or low fat milk, meat, fruit and plain yoghurt and low fat cheese as they contain less fat
- Avoid eating high fat fast food such as deep fried chicken, hamburgers, chips and pizza and cut down on your salt intake.
- Exercise often to help regulate your blood sugar – this will also reduce your risk of heart disease and help to control your weight
- Your medical practitioner will monitor your blood sugar level and you may be given a blood glucose meter to monitor yourself at home. If drugs are prescribed, take them as instructed to stabilise your blood sugar level – these could include tablets or insulin injections
- Because diabetes affects nerve function and blood flow, take good care of your feet to avoid infection and, in extreme cases, amputation
- Have regular eye tests as diabetes can affect your eyesight and damage your eyes.

## Seeing things more clearly

Almost one in three people with diabetes show symptoms of a serious eye disease called diabetic retinopathy.

Diabetic retinopathy is an eye disease that affects diabetics, threatening their vision. While this eye condition can be treated through laser surgery, good control of blood sugar and general health can help prevent it or slow it down.

Diabetic retinopathy causes changes in the blood vessels in the eyes through swelling, leaking and even growth of abnormal blood vessels.

If you've just been diagnosed as having diabetes, it's important to be aware of the impact the disease can have on your eyes and to go for regular eye tests.

People with Type 2 diabetes should have a dilated eye exam soon after being diagnosed, because they've probably had diabetes for some time without knowing it. Regardless of whether you're a Type 1 or 2 sufferer, after an initial exam, specialists recommend an annual dilated eye exam thereafter.

## RED ALERT

Many people are unaware that they have diabetes but the following symptoms can act as warning signs of the disease and your body's inability to transport sugar (energy) from your bloodstream to your cells or to absorb it properly...

What should I look out for?

- Feeling very thirsty
- Feeling very tired
- Needing to urinate frequently
- Experiencing unexplained weight loss
- Itching and skin infections
- Having blurred vision
- Cuts and bruises that heal slowly
- Feeling numbness in the hands and feet

## Why should I take action?

Abnormally high blood sugar levels can severely damage your body. If left untreated, diabetes can lead to:

- Heart disease
- Nerve damage
- Kidney failure
- Blindness
- Amputation

## What should I do if I experience these warning signs?

- Seek medical help immediately
- A simple finger-prick blood test will determine whether your blood sugar level is too high - your nearest clinic, pharmacy or doctor can do this test
- If you are diagnosed with diabetes, you need to establish whether you have Type 1 or Type 2 and start treatment accordingly

**Source: Kaelo (Pty) Ltd**