

Patient information: Type 1 diabetes (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is type 1 diabetes? — Type 1 diabetes (sometimes called type 1 “diabetes mellitus”) is a disorder that disrupts the way your body uses sugar.

All the cells in your body need sugar to work normally. Sugar gets into cells with the help of a hormone called insulin. If there is not enough insulin, or if the body stops responding to insulin, sugar builds up in the blood. That is what happens to people with diabetes.

There are 2 types of diabetes. People with type 1 diabetes make little or no insulin. People with type 2 diabetes sometimes also make too little insulin, but more often the problem is that their cells do not respond to insulin.

What are the symptoms of type 1 diabetes? — The symptoms include:

- Intense thirst
- Being very tired
- Urinating often
- Losing weight
- Blurred vision

In extreme cases, type 1 diabetes can also cause nausea or vomiting, belly pain, and panting.

How do I know if I have type 1 diabetes? — Your doctor or nurse can do a blood test to measure the amount of sugar in your blood. The test will show whether you have diabetes. If you do, your doctor or nurse can then decide whether it is type 1 or type 2—based on your age, your weight, and other factors.

How is type 1 diabetes treated? — Treatment for type 1 diabetes involves 2 key parts:

- Measuring your blood sugar often, to make sure it does not get too high or too low. (Your doctor or nurse will explain how to measure your blood sugar, and how often to do it.)
- Using insulin shots or an insulin pump to keep your blood sugar levels in the right range. (An insulin pump is a device that you wear close to your body. It is connected to tube that goes under your skin and supplies insulin.)

People with type 1 diabetes also need to carefully plan their meals and activity levels. That's because eating raises blood sugar, while being active lowers it. Despite the need to plan, people with diabetes can have normal diets, be active, eat out, and do all the things that most other people do.

How often do I need to see my doctor or nurse? — You will probably need to see your doctor or nurse at least 3 or 4 times a year. Sometimes you will need more visits to learn how to manage your diabetes or if your blood sugar is not well controlled.

During your visits, your doctor or nurse will want to measure your blood sugar using a test called “A1C.” This test tells you your average blood sugar level over the last few months. Its results will help your doctor or nurse decide whether to adjust your treatment.

During some of your visits, your doctor or nurse will also check other aspects of your health. For instance, he or she might measure your blood pressure or cholesterol. It is very important that you keep all your appointments with your doctor or nurse.

Why is it important to keep my blood sugar close to normal? — Having high blood sugar can cause serious problems over time. It can lead to:

- Nerve damage
- Kidney disease
- Vision problems (or even blindness)
- Pain or loss of feeling in the hands and feet
- The need to have fingers, toes, or other body parts removed (amputated)
- Heart disease and strokes

Having **low** blood sugar can cause problems, too. It can make your heart beat fast, and make you shake and sweat. If blood sugar gets really low, it can cause more serious problems, too. People with very low blood sugar can get headaches, get very sleepy, pass out, or even have seizures.

Why is it important to keep my blood pressure and cholesterol low? — People with diabetes have a much higher risk of heart disease and strokes than people who do not have diabetes. Keeping blood pressure and cholesterol low can help lower those risks.

If your doctor or nurse puts you on blood pressure or cholesterol medicines, be sure to take them. Studies show that these medicines can prevent heart attacks, strokes, and even death.

What if I want to get pregnant? — Many women with type 1 diabetes have healthy pregnancies. If you want to have a baby, make sure you control your blood sugar really well before and during pregnancy. This will protect you and your baby from problems.

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