

Patient information: Type 2 diabetes (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is type 2 diabetes? — Type 2 diabetes (sometimes called type 2 “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 the 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 different types of diabetes. In type 1 diabetes, the problem is that the body makes little or no insulin. In type 2 diabetes, the problem is that:

- The body’s cells do not respond to insulin
- The body does not make enough insulin
- Or both

What are the symptoms of type 2 diabetes? — Type 2 diabetes usually causes no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they include:

- The need to urinate often
- Intense thirst
- Blurry vision

If type 2 diabetes rarely causes symptoms, why should I care about it? — Even though type 2 diabetes might not make you feel sick, it can cause serious problems over time, if it is not treated. The disorder can lead to:

- Heart attacks
- Strokes
- 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)

How do I know if I have type 2 diabetes? — To find out if you have type 2 diabetes, your doctor or nurse can do a blood test to measure the amount of sugar in your blood.

How is type 2 diabetes treated? — There are a few medicines that help control blood sugar. Some people need to take pills that help the body make more insulin or that help insulin do its job. Others need insulin shots.

Sometimes, people with type 2 diabetes also need medicines to reduce the problems caused by the disease. For instance, medicines used to lower blood pressure can reduce the chances of a heart attack or stroke.

Medicines are not the only tool to manage diabetes. Being active, losing weight, eating right, and not smoking can all help people with diabetes stay as healthy as possible.

Can type 2 diabetes be prevented? — Yes, it can. To reduce your chances of getting type 2 diabetes, the most important thing you can do is control your weight. If you already have the disorder, losing weight can improve your health and blood sugar control. Being active can also help prevent or control the disorder.
