

What Is Diabetes?

Diabetes is a blood sugar disorder that comes in many forms, including:

■ Type 1 diabetes

In this autoimmune disorder, the immune system attacks the pancreas, destroying its ability to produce the hormone insulin. Formerly referred to as juvenile diabetes, type 1 diabetes can be diagnosed at any time of life. Type 1 diabetes accounts for about 5 to 10 percent of total diabetes cases.

■ Type 2 diabetes

Insulin acts like a key that unlocks cells, allowing sugar from the bloodstream to enter. When you have insulin resistance—the precursor to type 2 diabetes—your cells become “resistant” to insulin and don’t absorb sugar as readily. This triggers the pancreas to produce more insulin. Eventually, the pancreas wears out, can’t produce as much insulin as your body needs, and blood sugar rises. When your fasting blood sugar levels rise above 126 mg/dl, you have type 2 diabetes.

■ Adult onset diabetes

In the past, type 2 diabetes developed after age 40, earning it the nickname “adult onset diabetes.” Experts no longer use this phrase because more and more children now develop type 2 diabetes due to rising obesity levels.

■ Gestational diabetes

About 4 percent of women develop diabetes during pregnancy, a condition that usually goes away after the baby’s birth. No one knows precisely why diabetes develops during pregnancy, but some researchers speculate that hormones from the placenta may block the action of insulin, causing blood sugar levels to rise. This excess blood sugar travels through the placenta, causing the baby to gain too much weight. High blood sugar also can lead to other problems.

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■ Pre-diabetes

If you've been diagnosed with pre-diabetes, your fasting blood sugar levels are above 100 mg/dl and below 126 mg/dl—higher than normal but not high enough to qualify as type 2 diabetes. Pre-diabetes raises your risk for full-blown diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

■ Metabolic syndrome

About 47 million American adults have this syndrome, which includes insulin resistance or diabetes, excess fat in the abdomen, high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure. Metabolic syndrome raises your risk for heart disease. If you have three of the following five characteristics, you may have metabolic syndrome:

- Waist circumference greater than 37-39 inches (men) or 35 inches (women)
- Fasting blood sugar greater than 110mg/dl
- Triglyceride levels equal to or above 150
- HDL (good cholesterol) below 40 for men, 50 for women
- Blood pressure above 130/85

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