

Type 2 diabetes treatment plans may need to be different for older adults

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Around [6% of the world's population](#) suffer from type 2 diabetes. People of any age can develop the condition, but the [number of older adults](#) with type 2 diabetes is [rapidly increasing worldwide](#). In fact, adults over the age of 65 now account for [almost half](#) of all adult cases.

There are many ways type 2 [diabetes](#) can be managed—including controlling weight through [diet and exercise](#), or taking a drug to manage [blood sugar levels](#). But many people may not realize that type 2 diabetes in older adults can be [more complicated to manage](#). This means people over 65 may need to be managed differently when it comes to type 2 diabetes.

There are a number of reasons why type 2 diabetes may be more difficult to manage in older adults. First, aging can [affect blood sugar control](#), as the body's organs (such as the [pancreas](#), which controls insulin and [blood](#) sugar levels) lose their ability to work as well as they used to.

On top of this, some research has shown that diabetes may cause people to [age faster](#). It's thought that this is due to high levels of sugar in the [blood stream](#) prematurely aging the body's cells. This premature aging could lead to diseases associated with age-related decline (such as arthritis or dementia) [happening sooner](#).

Frailty—a state of health that is associated with [reduced physical and mental resilience](#) in older adults—also affects more people with type 2 diabetes than the rest of the population. In fact, an [estimated 25%](#) of older adults with type 2 diabetes are also frail. People who are frail and have type 2 diabetes have [poorer health and increased risk of death](#) from all causes compared to those who are not frail. Frailty is associated with reduced physical and cognitive functions and [increased risk](#) of low blood sugar. Both of these factors can make treating type 2 diabetes more complicated.

Dementia, which is more common in older adults, may also make it more difficult to manage type 2 diabetes. This is because the memory problems this condition causes may make it harder for patients to remember to [take their medication](#), or take the proper medication dosage. What's more, type 2 diabetes in older adults is actually a risk

factor for developing dementia—including [Alzheimer's disease](#). While the link between the two isn't fully understood, [elevated blood sugar levels](#) and [insulin not working properly](#) have been suggested as causes.

Having [other health conditions](#) can also make it more [difficult to treat diabetes](#). [Up to 40%](#) of older adults with type 2 diabetes have four or more co-existing diseases—such as heart disease or dementia. These conditions can make it impossible to achieve [normal treatment targets](#) and the drugs used to treat them can interact with those used to treat diabetes—which could lead to harm if not managed carefully. Alongside this, [poor access](#) to proper medical care, and being more susceptible to low blood sugar in older age are also reasons why [treating diabetes](#) can be so difficult in this age group.

Managing type 2 diabetes

Most [medical treatments](#) for type 2 diabetes work to [keep blood sugar levels low](#), and prevent them from spiking. But older adults with type 2 diabetes may actually have an increased risk of [developing dangerously low blood sugar levels](#). This usually happens if the medication is not used at the correct dose, or in people who have had diabetes for a long time.

Having very [low blood sugar levels](#) is dangerous as it can [increase the risk of falls](#)—a serious and sometimes life-threatening problem in older adults. Very low blood sugar levels also [increase the risk of heart problems](#). This means that [healthcare professionals](#) need to be careful they aren't being too aggressive in treatment plans for older adults to avoid causing other health problems.

Aging may also alter the body's [response to low blood sugar](#). This is significant, as when blood sugar falls too low it is extremely dangerous and can even [be fatal](#).

Older adults may also be less able to [recognize the symptoms](#) of low blood sugar compared to young adults. This is because symptoms such as dizziness and confusion are often less specific in older adults, and can be [confused with dementia](#). Older adults may also take [longer to recover](#) from low blood sugar.

Given that repeated bouts of low blood sugar can mean that older people are less able to [sense when it's happened](#) in the future, it's important that drugs prescribed to older adults for type 2 diabetes are given at the correct doses. Care especially needs to be taken prescribing insulin, the body's [blood sugar control](#) hormone, to very old adults as this [significantly increases](#) the risk of low blood [sugar](#).

Given our aging population, it is projected that more [older adults](#) will have type 2 diabetes in the future. This makes it especially important to improve how we treat diabetes in this age group. Though [specific treatment guidelines have been developed](#), some evidence suggests that care approaches need to be [more cautious and personalized](#) to each patient, taking into account their other health conditions, and that treatments consider quality of life for each patient.

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