

10 ways to prevent diabetes complications

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More than 37 million people in the U.S. have diabetes, and more than 96 million adults in the U.S.—over one-third—have prediabetes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Diabetes mellitus refers to a group of diseases that affect how your body

uses [blood sugar](#). The underlying cause of [diabetes](#) varies by type. But no matter what type of diabetes you have, it can lead to excess sugar in your blood. Too much sugar in your blood can lead to serious health problems.

The two types of chronic diabetes conditions are Type 1 diabetes and Type 2 diabetes. Type 1 diabetes can develop at any age, although it often appears during childhood or adolescence. Type 2 diabetes, which is more common, also can develop at any age, although it's more common in people over 45.

Prediabetes means you have a higher-than-normal blood sugar level, but it's not yet high enough to be considered Type 2 diabetes. Gestational diabetes is diabetes diagnosed for the first time during pregnancy, causing high blood sugar levels that can affect your pregnancy and your baby's health.

Long-term complications of diabetes develop gradually. The longer you have diabetes—and the less controlled your blood sugar—the higher the risk of complications. Eventually, diabetes complications could be disabling or even life-threatening.

Following your diabetes treatment plan takes round-the-clock commitment, but your efforts are worthwhile. Careful diabetes care can reduce your risk of serious—even life-threatening—complications.

Consider these strategies to take an active role in your diabetes care and enjoy a healthier future:

1. Make a commitment to managing your diabetes

Members of your diabetes care team—[primary care](#) professional, diabetes care and education specialist, and dietitian, for example—can

help you learn the basics of diabetes care and offer support along the way. But it's up to you to manage your condition.

Make a commitment to:

- Learn all you can about diabetes.
- Make healthy eating and physical activity part of your daily routine.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Monitor your blood sugar, and follow your health care professional's instructions for managing your blood sugar level.
- Take your medications as directed by your health care team, and ask them for help when you need it.

2. Don't smoke

Smoking increases your risk of Type 2 diabetes and the risk of various diabetes complications, including:

- Reduced blood flow in the legs and feet, which can lead to infections, nonhealing ulcers and possible amputation.
- Worse blood sugar control.
- Heart disease.
- Stroke.
- Eye disease, which can lead to blindness.
- Nerve damage.
- Kidney disease.
- Premature death.

Avoid smoking or quit smoking if you smoke. Talk to your health care team about ways to help you stop smoking or using other types of tobacco.

3. Keep your [blood pressure](#) and cholesterol under control

Like diabetes, high blood pressure can damage your blood vessels. High cholesterol is a concern, too, since the resulting damage is often worse and more rapid when you have diabetes. When these conditions team up, they can lead to a heart attack, stroke or other life-threatening conditions.

Eating a healthy, reduced-fat and low-salt diet, avoiding excess alcohol, and exercising regularly can go a long way toward controlling high blood pressure and cholesterol. Your health care professional also may recommend taking prescription medication, if necessary.

4. Schedule regular physicals and eye exams

Schedule two to four diabetes checkups a year, in addition to your yearly physical and routine eye exams.

During these appointments, your health care team will:

- Ask about your nutrition and activity level.
- Look for any diabetes-related complications—including signs of kidney damage, [nerve damage](#) and heart disease—as well as screen for other medical problems.
- Examine your feet for any issues that may need treatment.
- Check for signs of retinal damage, cataracts and glaucoma.

5. Keep your vaccines up to date

Diabetes increases your risk of getting certain illnesses. Routine vaccinations can help prevent them. Ask your health care team about:

- Flu vaccine.
- Pneumonia vaccine.
- Hepatitis B vaccine.

—Any other vaccines they might recommend, including tetanus.

6. Take care of your teeth

Diabetes can leave you prone to gum infections. Brush your teeth at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste, floss your teeth once a day and schedule dental exams at least twice a year. Call your dentist if your gums bleed or look red or swollen.

7. Pay attention to your feet

High blood sugar can reduce blood flow and damage the nerves in your feet. Left untreated, cuts and blisters can lead to serious infections. Diabetes can lead to pain, tingling or loss of sensation in your feet.

To prevent foot problems:

—Wash your feet daily in lukewarm water. Avoid soaking your feet, as this can lead to dry skin.

—Dry your feet gently, especially between the toes.

—Moisturize your feet and ankles with lotion or petroleum jelly. Do not put oils or creams between your toes—the extra moisture can lead to infection.

—Check your feet daily for calluses, blisters, sores, redness or swelling.

—Consult your health care team if you have a sore or other foot problem that doesn't start to heal within a few days. If you have a foot ulcer—an open sore—see your doctor right away.

—Don't go barefoot, indoors or outdoors.

8. Consider a daily aspirin

If you have diabetes and other cardiovascular risk factors, such as smoking or high blood pressure, your health care professional may

recommend taking a low dose of aspirin every day to help reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke. If you don't have additional cardiovascular risk factors, the risk of bleeding from aspirin use may outweigh any of its benefits. Ask your [health care](#) team whether daily aspirin therapy is appropriate for you, including which strength of aspirin would be best.

9. If you drink alcohol, do so responsibly

Alcohol can cause high or low blood sugar, depending on how much you drink and whether you eat at the same time. If you choose to drink alcohol, do so only in moderation, which means no more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men.

Always drink with a meal or snack, and remember to include the calories from any alcohol you drink in your daily calorie count. Also, be aware that alcohol can lead to low [blood](#) sugar later, especially for people who use insulin.

10. Take stress seriously

If you're stressed, it's easy to neglect your usual [diabetes care](#) routine. To manage your stress, set limits, prioritize your tasks, learn relaxation techniques and get plenty of sleep. And above all, stay positive. Diabetes care is within your control. If you're willing to do your part, diabetes won't stand in the way of an active, healthy life.

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