

Healthy living with diabetes

Diabetes Mellitus is a very common health condition. About 2.9 million people in the UK are known to have the condition – that is about 3 in every 100 people.

In addition, there are an estimated 850,000 people who have the condition but do not know it.¹

What is it?

Diabetes Mellitus is a condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high. If you suffer from Diabetes Mellitus your body is unable to use insulin very efficiently. Insulin is a hormone, produced by the pancreas gland, which helps glucose enter the cells where it is used as fuel by the body. By undertaking regular exercise and eating a healthy diet, diabetics can ensure their body uses insulin as efficiently as possible.

There are two types of Diabetes Mellitus:

- Type 1 Diabetes develops if the body is unable to produce insulin. This usually starts in childhood or young adulthood and is also known as 'Juvenile Diabetes'. Some people may develop it later in life, when it is known as LADA (Latent Autoimmune Diabetes in Adults). With this version, the body eventually stops producing insulin.

- Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus is developed when the body can still make insulin, but either it does not make enough or what is made does not work properly. This is referred to as 'Maturity Onset Diabetes' because it occurs mostly in people over the age of 40. There is also an exception to this, known as MODY (Maturity-Onset Diabetes of the Young). Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus is commonly linked to obesity.

Main symptoms

The main symptoms of Diabetes Mellitus include thirst, producing excessive amounts of urine, tiredness, 'ketotic breath' (a distinctive change in breath smell caused when fat is burned to gain energy), blurred vision, genital itching, weight loss and muscle wasting (loss of muscle bulk).

Diabetes Mellitus is a serious medical condition that can be controlled through a healthy diet and regular exercise. Someone who has the condition can still enjoy a full and healthy life so long as they have close medical supervision.

Managing Diabetes

- Someone with Type 1 Diabetes Mellitus is always insulin dependent. A suitable diet and regular exercise are important components of managing the condition.
- Type 2 Diabetes can often be managed by diet and exercise alone, when someone starts, and keeps up, a healthy change in lifestyle. For some diabetics, prescribed oral medication or insulin is also necessary.
- The main aims of treatment for both types of Diabetes are to achieve a stabilised blood sugar level as near to normal as possible, leading to a good quality of life for the diabetic. A stabilised blood sugar level will also help to protect a diabetic against long-term complications which can result in damage to the eyes, kidneys, nerves, heart and major arteries.

A healthy lifestyle

Adopting a healthy lifestyle plays a key role in ensuring Diabetes has the minimum impact on someone's health. A healthy and balanced diet is essential – one that is low in saturated fat, sugar and salt; and high in fibre, vegetables and fruit. Carbohydrates should be consumed throughout the day – rather than all in one go – to prevent high blood sugar levels after a meal. Carbohydrates include starchy foods such as pasta, potatoes, bread and cereals and sugary foods including fruit, sweets and biscuits.

Diabetics should only drink alcohol in moderation and always with food. For diabetics who smoke, it is important to try and stop. Smoking damages the circulation and, like Diabetes itself, increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases. Physical activity has a number of particular benefits for diabetics. It promotes better blood circulation and helps to maintain a healthy weight, whilst also helping the body to use insulin more efficiently. People who are overweight and do not take any regular physical activity are more at risk of developing Type 2 Diabetes. In particular, people who are an 'apple shape' with lots of fat around the abdomen are at greater risk.

How does Diabetes affect people?

Most problems are associated with maintaining stable blood sugar levels.

- Hypoglycaemic attacks may occur if blood sugar levels fall too low – this causes feelings of faintness, disorientation and ultimately loss of consciousness.
- Conversely, people also experience symptoms if their blood sugar becomes too high. The symptoms are exactly the same as the main symptoms of the illness (as mentioned above).

Poorly controlled or untreated Diabetes Mellitus can result in hospitalisation because diabetics are more susceptible to other illnesses. They are especially affected more often and more seriously by infections, and an infection often

results in a serious hyperglycaemic episode. Regular review by a diabetic consultant and/or specialist diabetic nurse is essential. If Diabetes is well controlled, none of the symptoms will occur and the risk of developing complications later is considerably reduced.

Useful references:

Diabetes UK
www.diabetes.org.uk