

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a chronic condition where the pancreas cannot produce sufficient insulin, or cannot use the insulin it has. Insulin is a hormone produced by the pancreas that transforms the glucose found in the food we eat into energy. Not being able to produce insulin or use it effectively leads to raised glucose levels in the blood.

In South Africa, 7% of adults aged 21 to 79 – 3.85 million people – have diabetes. A large proportion of these remain undiagnosed. Several factors such as the ageing population, economic transition and urbanisation associated with nutrition transition and obesity have contributed to the increased diabetes prevalence. In 2000, it was estimated that 87% of diabetes cases in South Africa were attributed to excess body weight.

3 Types of diabetes

Type 1 diabetes occurs when the pancreas stops producing insulin. It usually starts in young people under the age of 30, including very young children and infants, and the onset is sudden and dramatic. People who have type 1 diabetes must inject insulin to survive. Insulin dosages are carefully balanced with food intake and exercise programmes.

Type 2 diabetes is caused when the insulin, which the pancreas produces, is either not enough or does not work properly. Approximately 85 – 90% of all people with diabetes are type 2, and many people who have this condition are undiagnosed. Although type 2 is, in itself, not life threatening, in many ways it is more dangerous than type 1, as its onset is gradual and hard to detect.

Gestational diabetes is a temporary condition that occurs during pregnancy. Both mother and child have an increased risk of developing diabetes in the future.² diabetes may show no symptoms

Signs & symptoms

- Unusual thirst
- Frequent urination
- Unusual weight loss
- Extreme fatigue or lack of energy
- Blurred vision
- Frequent or recurring infections
- Cuts and bruises that are slow to heal, boils and itching skin
- Tingling and numbness in the hands or feet.

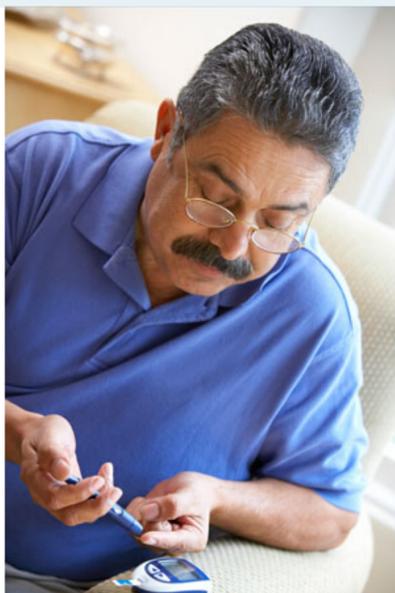
However, many people who have type 2 diabetes may show no symptoms



Treatment

People with diabetes need to first accept the fact that they have the condition and then learn how to manage it. The goal is to bring blood glucose levels into the normal range, which is between 4–6mmol/l. Glucose monitoring is a simple glucose test that can be done at home with a glucose monitor.

Effective treatment includes learning about the condition in order to make good lifestyle choices, as well as healthy eating, exercise, weight management, medication, lifestyle management.



Complications

Untreated or badly managed diabetes can cause high levels of blood glucose which can slowly damage both the fine nerves and the small & large blood vessels in the body, resulting in a variety of complications. These include heart disease, blindness, amputation, kidney disease and erectile dysfunction or impotence. The good news is that with careful management, these complications can be delayed and even prevented, but early diagnosis is very important.

Source: <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/general-publication/diabetes-facts>