

# How to Live With Diabetes

By Curt Hagedorn

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According to the American Association of Diabetes Educators, the number of Americans with diabetes reached a new high of 18.2 million in 2003, and the increase in cases has shown no signs of abating. What is diabetes? Simply put, diabetes is a condition of abnormally high blood glucose (sugar) levels brought on either by problems with your body's insulin action, production or both. There are two major types of diabetes. Type 1, or insulin-dependent/juvenile onset diabetes, results when the body destroys the pancreatic cells that create the hormone insulin – which regulates the body's blood sugar levels. Type 2 diabetes, often called adult-onset diabetes, is by far the most prevalent and increasing form of the disease and represents around 90 percent of all cases. It is caused by a malfunction in the body's ability to process sugars when cells become insulin-resistant – in other words, your body is producing insulin but it is not being used properly. Finally, pregnant women often show signs of gestational diabetes, which is a glucose intolerance linked to pregnancy that can often be a warning sign of imminent Type 2 diabetes.

The consequences of diabetes are severe. Unchecked, it can radically increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, can cause circulatory problems in the extremities which if untreated could lead to the loss of limbs, can contribute to the deterioration and eventual loss of eyesight and left completely uncontrolled can be fatal. Though Type 2 diabetes may not seem as severe as Type 1 diabetes, it is far more likely to be ignored and therefore can be far more dangerous. Though many times people with Type 2 Diabetes may not show significant symptoms, they can include increased thirst and more frequent urination, erectile dysfunction (in men), increased hunger, blurred vision and fatigue.

Though Type 1 diabetics need regular monitoring and doses of insulin through either injection or a pump in order to keep their blood sugar under control, most health professionals agree that Type 2 diabetics can to some extent control their blood sugar through diet, exercise and, if necessary, medication. The most important thing for Type 2 diabetics to know is that ignoring the problem can only result in later complications but that with your doctor's help there is something you can do to control your blood sugar. Again, most doctors recommend that first and foremost, if you are overweight (and a sizable proportion of Type 2 diabetics are) that you take positive

steps to lose that extra weight including an appropriate diet and exercise program – if necessary you should see a nutritionist or other expert – sometimes called a “coach” -- on the diabetic diet, as sometimes information can be complicated or conflicted. Your doctor also may recommend monitoring your blood sugar regularly with one of the many devices widely available today, as well as oral medications that can help your body regulate blood sugar. Regular doctor visits to assess your progress and recommend changes to your routine are also extremely important.

If you have high blood sugar, you may also have heard of a condition called pre-diabetes, where your blood glucose tolerance is impaired, but you may not yet have full-blown diabetes – and may not develop it. With impaired glucose tolerance, weight loss, a sensible diet low in sugars and carbohydrates and regular exercise are even more important. And do not simply assume that you are “pre-diabetic” – again, it is even more important to monitor your blood sugar until your doctor is satisfied that weight loss, diet and other measures you are taking are truly helping to maintain constant healthy blood sugar levels.

Though it is impossible to outline all of the potential treatments and breakthroughs in diabetic treatment and care, there are hundreds of groups from the AMA on down who can provide you with information – your local library or bookstore also can provide you with a wealth of information on controlling diabetes. However, if you are overweight and don't get regular exercise, remember that diabetes can increase the dangers of that condition many times over – see your doctor today and have your blood sugar checked so that, if you do have diabetes or a pre-diabetic condition, you can begin to learn how to make the significant changes in diet, exercise and lifestyle that can help you live with diabetes.