Understanding Diabetes: Types, Risks, Symptoms and How to Take Action

Diabetes is one of the most common chronic conditions in the UK, affecting an estimated 5.6 million people as of 2024, with rates continuing to rise. Around 90% of those living with diabetes have type 2 diabetes, and recent figures show that a further 549,000 people are at risk of developing it.

Diabetes can have a significant impact on quality of life, affecting everything from daily routines to long-term health outcomes. That is why Diabetes Awareness Week, taking place from 8–14 June, is an important opportunity to raise awareness of the different types of diabetes, recognise the signs and symptoms, and understand the risk factors that can increase someone's chance of developing the condition.



> **In 2012, about 56 million people died throughout the world; 620,000 of them died due to human violence ... and 1.5 million died of diabetes. Sugar is now more dangerous than gunpowder.**
>
> *- Yuval Noah Harari (historian and author of the bestseller Sapiens)*

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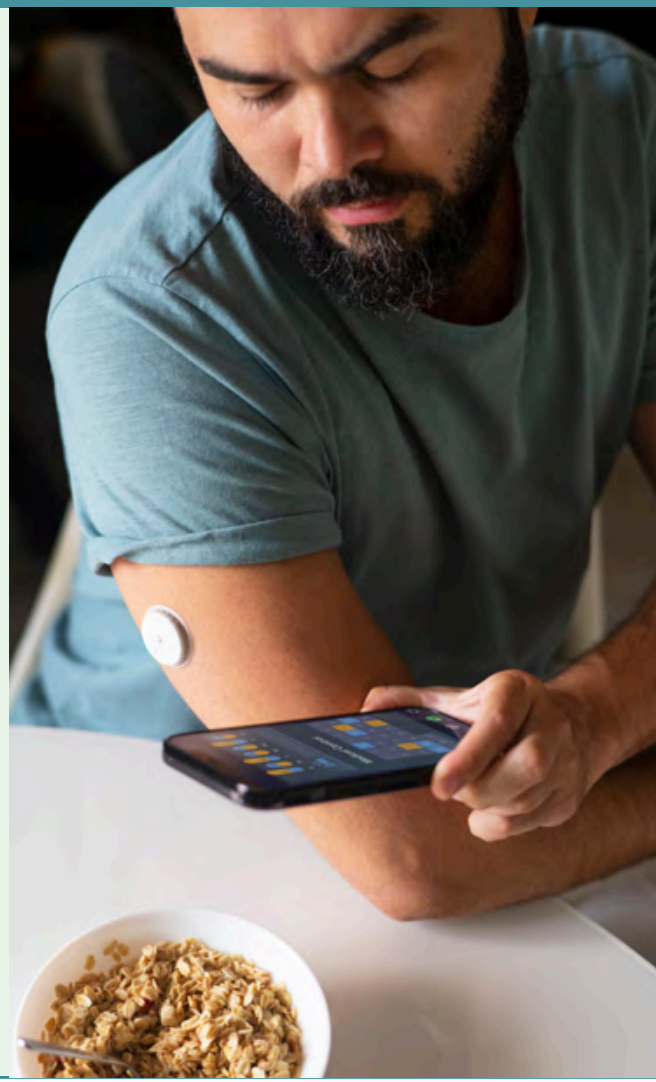
The Different Types of Diabetes

Diabetes is a complex condition that can affect people in different ways. While the main types are type 1, type 2, and gestational diabetes, there are also other, less common forms that are equally important.

In fact, around 2% of people are affected by these other forms of diabetes. Understanding these different forms are crucial, as each one requires different approaches to treatment and management. These include:

Type 1 Diabetes

- Type 1 diabetes is an **autoimmune disease** where the immune system destroys the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas.
- As a result, the **body can't produce insulin**, a hormone that helps move glucose (sugar) from the blood into cells for energy. Without it, glucose builds up in the bloodstream, causing high blood sugar levels.
- It is usually diagnosed in **children and young adults**, but it can develop at any age.
- There is **no known way to prevent type 1 diabetes**, and currently, no cure.



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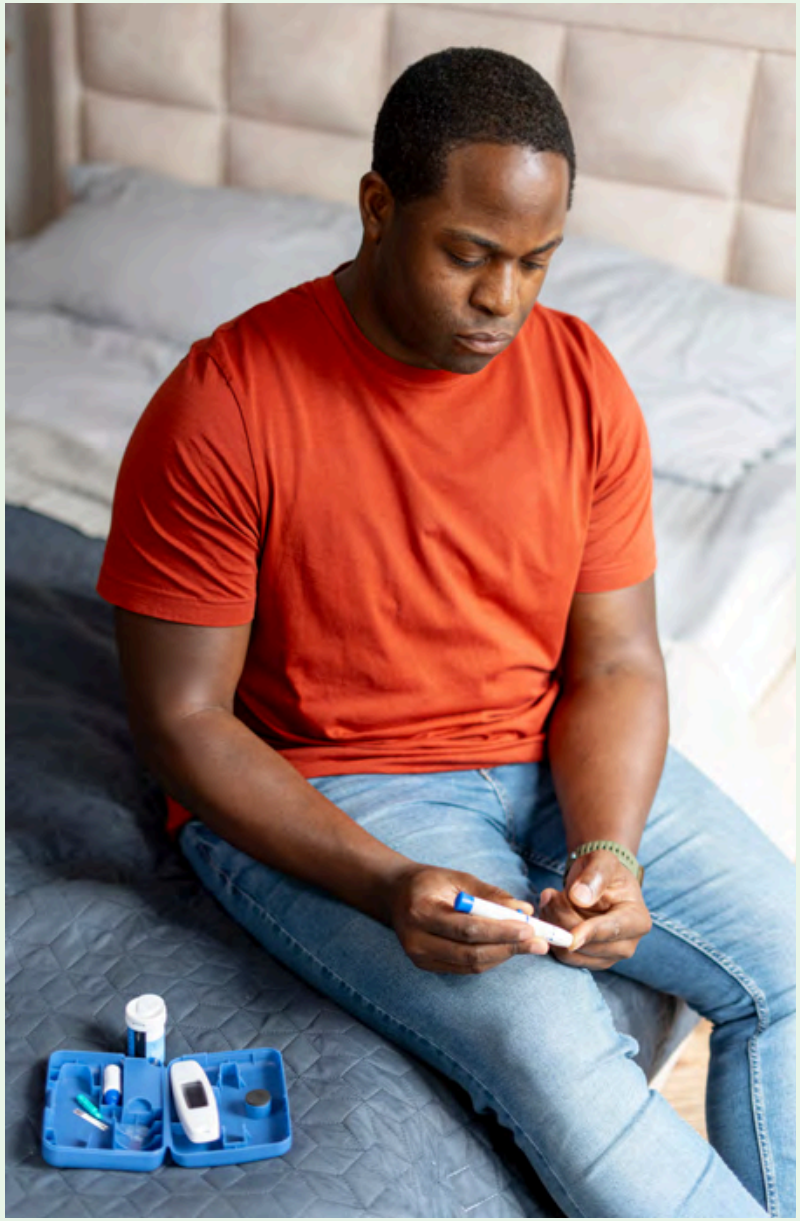
Type 2 Diabetes

- Type 2 diabetes develops when the **body becomes resistant to insulin** or doesn't produce enough of it.
- As a result, **blood sugar levels rise, which can lead to long-term health problems** affecting the eyes, heart, kidneys, and feet.
- It's **often linked to lifestyle factors**, such as being overweight or inactive, but can also be influenced by age, ethnicity, and family history.
- There's **currently no cure**, but with the right support, many people can **manage their condition** and, in some cases, put it into remission.

Gestational Diabetes

- Gestational diabetes **occurs during pregnancy** when hormones produced by the placenta cause insulin resistance, leading to high blood sugar.
- It's typically diagnosed through a blood test between **24 and 28 weeks of pregnancy.**
- The condition usually **disappears after childbirth**, but it increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes later in life.
- Maintaining a **healthy diet, regular physical activity**, and **monitoring blood sugar levels** are key to managing gestational diabetes.

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Diabetes 1.5/LADA

- Latent Autoimmune Diabetes in Adults (LADA), also known as type 1.5 diabetes, **shares characteristics of both type 1 and type 2 diabetes.**
- With LADA, the **pancreas gradually loses its insulin-producing ability.** This type of diabetes also has an autoimmune component.
- Symptoms **develop more gradually** than in type 1 diabetes (over months rather than weeks) but **faster and more noticeably than in type 2.**
- LADA typically **affects adults aged 30–50 who are of healthy weight.**

Diabetes Insipidus

- A **rare type of diabetes** where individuals need to urinate frequently and feel thirsty a lot of the time.
- It's caused by a **deficiency in ADH**, a hormone that regulates the amount of water in the body.
- The lack of ADH **affects the kidneys**, preventing urine concentration and causing excessive water loss.

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Risk Factors and Causes Associated with Diabetes

Despite becoming more common, diabetes still has a significant impact on people's lives. It occurs when the body either produces insufficient insulin, cannot use it effectively, or stops producing it altogether.

Understanding the risk factors that can make you more susceptible to diabetes is crucial for preventing, detecting, and effectively managing this increasingly common chronic disease.



Risk Factors Influencing Type 1 Diabetes:

- **Family history:** Having a parent, brother, or sister with type 1 diabetes.
- **Age:** While type 1 diabetes can develop at any age, it most often begins in childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood.
- **Ethnicity:** People of white ethnicity appear to be more vulnerable to type 1 diabetes.

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Risk Factors Influencing Type 2 Diabetes:

- **Prediabetes:** A condition where blood sugar levels are higher than normal but not yet at the levels that would be found in diabetic individuals.
- **Weight:** Being overweight or obese significantly increases your risk – studies found that obese individuals are up to 80% more likely to develop type 2 diabetes than people at a healthier weight.
- **Age:** Risk increases from age 45 onwards.
- **Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease:** This condition is linked to a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes.
- **Ethnicity:** People from Black African, African Caribbean, or South Asian backgrounds are at higher risk.
- **Lifestyle:** Lack of physical activity (exercising fewer than three times a week) and an unhealthy diet can both contribute to the risk.

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Risk Factors Influencing Gestational Diabetes:

- **Ethnicity:** African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Asian American people are at higher risk.
- **Age:** Older than 25 years old.
- **Pregnancy:** Giving birth to a baby weighing over 9 pounds.
- **Weight:** Being overweight or obese before or during pregnancy.
- **Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS):** A hormonal condition that increases the likelihood of gestational diabetes.

Signs and Symptoms of Diabetes

- Feeling thirsty much more often
- Urinating more often, especially at night
- Losing weight without trying
- Low blood sugar (hypoglycemia): shakiness, lightheadedness, mood changes, numb lips or tongue
- High blood sugar (hyperglycemia): thirst, hunger, blurred vision, frequent urination, slow-healing wounds

However, it's important to note that some people with diabetes may not experience any symptoms, especially in the early stages of the disease.



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Complications Associated with Diabetes

If you're living with diabetes, it's essential to understand the potential complications that can arise from the condition. Some of these include:



Eye problems (Diabetic Retinopathy)

Diabetes is a leading cause of preventable sight loss in the UK. High blood sugar can damage the blood vessels in the retina. If left untreated, it can lead to permanent vision loss.



Heart Attack and Stroke

Diabetes increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases, including heart attacks and strokes. High blood glucose levels can damage blood vessels and the nerves that control the heart.



Nerve Damage (Neuropathy)

Diabetic neuropathy is nerve damage caused by diabetes, usually affecting the legs and feet. It can cause pain, tingling, and numbness, increasing the risk of unnoticed injuries, infections, and amputations.



Foot Problems

Due to nerve damage and poor blood flow, foot problems are common in people with diabetes. These issues can lead to ulcers and infections. In the UK, approx 169 diabetes-related amputations occur each week.

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Kidney Problems (Nephropathy)

Over time, high blood sugar can damage the kidneys, making diabetes the leading cause of kidney disease. In fact, around 1 in 3 adults with diabetes are affected

Gum Disease and Other Mouth Issues

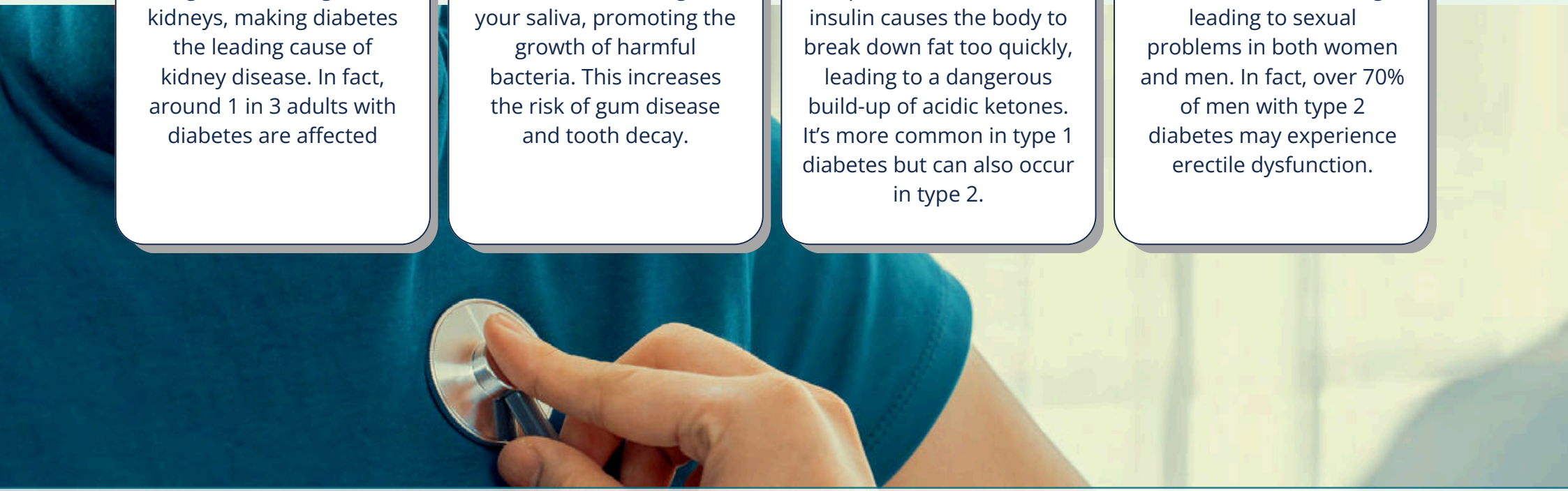
High blood sugar levels can lead to more sugar in your saliva, promoting the growth of harmful bacteria. This increases the risk of gum disease and tooth decay.

Diabetic Ketoacidosis (DKA)

DKA is a serious complication where lack of insulin causes the body to break down fat too quickly, leading to a dangerous build-up of acidic ketones. It's more common in type 1 diabetes but can also occur in type 2.

Sexual Problems

Diabetes can cause nerve and blood vessel damage, leading to sexual problems in both women and men. In fact, over 70% of men with type 2 diabetes may experience erectile dysfunction.



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Getting a Diagnosis



If you're experiencing any of the symptoms of diabetes, it's imperative that you consult a healthcare professional to get tested for diabetes as soon as possible.

Early detection is essential as it can increase the possibility of effectively managing the condition. In the UK, diabetes is diagnosed through blood tests that measure your blood sugar levels. These types of blood tests might include:

AC1 Test:

This common blood test measures your average blood sugar levels over the past 2–3 months. An A1C result of 6.5% or higher on two separate tests indicates diabetes.

Glucose Tolerance Test:

This test checks how your body responds to sugar. After fasting and drinking a sugary drink, your blood sugar is tested two hours later. A result of 200 mg/dL or more indicates diabetes.

Random Blood Sugar Test:

This test measures your blood sugar at a random time. A blood sugar level of 200 mg/dL or higher, combined with certain symptoms, indicates you may have diabetes.

Fasting Blood Sugar Test

This blood test measures your blood sugar levels after fasting overnight for 8 hours. A blood sugar level of 126 mg/dL or higher is an indication of diabetes.

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Treatment of Diabetes



Managing diabetes is a lifelong process that requires a personalised approach. Here are some common treatments and ways individuals can manage their diabetes better:

Treatment for Type 1 Diabetes:

Insulin Pumps:

A small device worn on the skin that delivers insulin continuously, reducing the need for injections. It can lower the risk of hypos, improve blood sugar control, and offer more flexibility than insulin pens.

Islet Cell Transplant:

A low-risk procedure that transfers insulin-producing cells from a donor to the liver. It may benefit those with severe hypos and reduce the need for insulin injections.

Continuous Glucose Monitoring:

A device that tracks blood sugar in real time and alerts you to highs or lows. Available on the NHS for all with type 1 diabetes, it helps improve control by showing patterns and trends.

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Treatment for Type 2 Diabetes:



Tablets and Medication

Metformin is the most common medication prescribed to help individuals manage their type 2 diabetes.



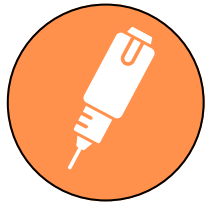
Diet and Exericse

Although you can't 'reverse' type 2 diabetes, by eating healthily and doing plenty of exercise, you might be able to put it into remission.



Weight Loss Survey

Several obesity surgery procedures are available to aid weight loss if this is a significant contributing factor.



Insulin

If metformin isn't enough, insulin may be needed to manage type 2 diabetes. It's taken via injections or a pump to help control blood sugar.

Counselling and professional mental health support are available for all those who need them. Emotional support can be extremely helpful for individuals struggling with any aspect of living with diabetes.

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I Don't Have Diabetes, But I'd Like to Reduce My Risk Level

While diabetes cannot be permanently 'reversed', it can be prevented or managed through lifestyle changes. To lower your risk of developing diabetes, you could:

- **Lose weight (if overweight):** Research found that losing 7% of body weight can cut diabetes risk by nearly 60%.
- **Eat more plant foods:** Fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains promote weight loss and lower risk.
- **Be more active:** Aim for 150 mins of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise and 2–3 resistance sessions per week.
- **Choose healthy fats:** Include olive oil, nuts, seeds, and oily fish in your diet.
- **Build long-term healthy habits:** Fill half your plate with veg, and balance the rest with whole grains and lean protein.



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Diabetes: The Key Takeaways

Diabetes Awareness Week serves as a reminder of the importance of education, prevention, and management of diabetes.

With millions of people worldwide affected by this chronic condition, it's crucial to continue spreading awareness about the risk factors, symptoms, and available treatment options.

By working together to raise awareness and promote healthy lifestyles, we can support those living with diabetes and work towards a world free from this disease. Knowledge is power, and taking proactive steps towards diabetes prevention and management can help us lead healthier and happier lives.

> ! Remember: if you're concerned about any of the information in this article, don't hesitate to contact a healthcare professional.

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