

Staying Healthy With Type 2 Diabetes

By Barbara Brody



You might have heard that type 2 diabetes is the "better" form of diabetes to have (compared with type 1), but that's not exactly right. While some people with type 2 can control the condition with oral medication and simple lifestyle tweaks, others need stronger treatment. What's more, the long-term consequences of having type 2 can be very serious. The upshot: You have a lot of power to determine what your future with type 2 looks like.

"Keeping good control of your blood sugar really helps reduce your risk of complications," says Meg Crook, MD, an endocrinologist at the University of Virginia Health System. That means making the changes to your medication plan and lifestyle habits you need to keep your A1c down. You'll be much less likely to have serious problems if you keep your A1c below 7%, but if you can get it below 6%, that's even better, she says.

You should also be sure you understand what the possible complications of the disease are, so you can catch them right away if they do crop up. To do that, ask your doctor these questions:

How can I make sure my feet stay healthy?

Having high blood sugar for a long time can cause nerve damage, often in the feet. That means you might not feel calluses and sores, which can become infected. Crook says you

should check your feet regularly (perhaps before you put on your socks) and see your doctor once a year for a monofilament test to check your sensation.

How will I know if I am getting kidney disease?

You might not know, because it rarely has noticeable symptoms in the beginning, says Crook. Your doctor should order a microalbumin test each year to check for protein in the urine that might indicate early kidney damage.

Is it true that I have a higher-than-average risk of heart disease?

Absolutely, says Crook. "Someone who has diabetes has an equivalent risk of having a heart attack as someone who's already had a heart attack," she says. Diabetes and heart disease are closely linked.

How often should I get my eyes checked?

See an ophthalmologist at least once a year for a complete exam so that you can be monitored for conditions including glaucoma, cataracts, and retinopathy (damage to blood vessels in the retina). "If you have branching blood vessels that are likely to bleed, [the doctor] can laser them to prevent that," says Crook.

What other complications should be on my radar?

People with diabetes also face a higher risk of gum disease, sexual problems, bladder issues, sleep apnea, dementia, and depression. They're more apt to get certain types of cancer, too. But seeing your doctor regularly, taking your medication as prescribed, and keeping your lifestyle healthy can make all the difference.

"Drink lots of water, no soda, eat plenty of vegetables, and stay as active as you can. Your goal should be about 150 minutes of moderate activity a week," says Crook. "I like to tell patients that what you do with your lifestyle has two to three times the impact of what a drug can do."

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SOURCES:

Meg Crook, MD, endocrinologist, University of Virginia Health System.

National Institute of Diabetes, Digestive, and Kidney Diseases: "The A1C Test and Diabetes;" "Preventing Diabetes Problems."

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