

# Diabetes – in a nutshell



Understanding diabetes – and its various forms – is not always easy. A summary of frequently asked questions are answered by Diabetes Physician Dr Rinki Murphy in one of three videos on ‘diabetes management’.

## How do you describe diabetes to someone who has no experience of the condition?

Diabetes is a condition where the sugar levels in the blood are higher than what is normal and healthy for the blood vessels. It commonly leads to complications in the small blood vessels that supply the eyes, the kidneys and the feet, after long-term higher blood sugar levels.

The ways in which diabetes can occur is classified into two broad groups but there are many other groups as well. The most common cause is type 2 diabetes, followed by type 1 diabetes.

**Type 1 diabetes** is where the pancreas stops making insulin, specifically the cells that make the main hormone that regulates blood sugar.

People with **type 2 diabetes** have a combination of their pancreas not making enough insulin as well as their bodies being more resistant to the insulin that is being produced.



## How is diabetes diagnosed?

**Type 2** generally presents quite slowly. Many people don't recognise that they have diabetes at all and it is picked up on screening, or incidentally when people are unwell. But some people do get symptoms – such as feeling more thirsty, getting up at night to go to the toilet, and feeling more tired than usual, having blurred vision.

There are some risk factors particularly relating to family history of diabetes, having had diabetes during pregnancy, being overweight and having a sedentary lifestyle are all associated with getting type 2 diabetes.

People with **type 1** diabetes generally present quite acutely with symptoms of high blood sugar levels such as blurred vision, being thirsty, getting up at night to go to the toilet to pass urine more often (day and night) and some people present very rapidly and are quite unwell – such as vomiting, abdominal pain - and need to be hospitalised and usually those signs are present about three months before someone is diagnosed. But they can be even shorter or longer than that.

Type 1 diabetes is most common in childhood but the age at which people can present can be up to the very elderly and as young as six months of age.



## Can you prevent diabetes?

Certainly once you are diagnosed with diabetes – type 2 diabetes – it is possible to vastly improve if not, even go into remission from type 2 diabetes by losing weight and also by altering your diet. In many cases it is possible to reduce the amount of medications required, or delay them by choosing foods wisely and increasing physical activity.

Ethnicity is also a factor. People of Asian and India ethnicity tend to have more fat on the inside, around their organs, compared to what is under their skin. It can be deceiving in terms of what their body weight to height is and how much fat is ultimately sitting near the pancreas and predisposing them to type 2 diabetes. Therefore in some cases people need to lose only a small amount weight, particularly if they're less overweight, and that can still make a big difference in their control of diabetes.



## What steps should I take if I have prediabetes?

Being diagnosed with prediabetes means that the risk of developing type 2 diabetes is quite high and there are key things that you can do to reduce that risk and maintaining or achieving a lower body weight is a big factor, and that is possible by changing diet and increasing physical activity. Being aware of what your height and weight is and discussing what the ideal target would be and taking steps to get to the target would be a priority to reduce that risk.

## When would someone be referred to a diabetes physician?

Generally people are referred through their general practitioner if they have specific needs around their diabetes diagnosis, or their management or complications.

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Diabetes New Zealand is a leading national organisation and registered charity. Our aim is to support all people affected by diabetes to live well through: Providing information and support to help people take charge of their health • Acting as an advocate and representing all people with, or at risk of developing, diabetes • Raising awareness of diabetes, especially around lifestyle factors that can help prevent or delay type 2 and help manage and control type 1 and type 2.