

How to keep your skin healthy

Up to a third of people with diabetes will have a skin disorder caused or affected by diabetes at some time in their lives. However, most skin conditions can be prevented or easily treated if caught early.

Some of these problems are skin conditions that anyone can have, but that people with diabetes get more easily. These include bacterial infections, fungal infections, and itching.

When you have diabetes:

- > You are more likely to develop skin problems.
- > Skin issues are more likely to become infected (especially if your blood glucose levels are high).
- > It is best to seek early help for any skin problem as it can easily get worse.
- > If you are a person who's prone to developing dry skin it's best to take action to keep your skin more supple. This includes protecting your skin from harsh chemicals, harsh weather and harsh soaps. It also includes using a light moisturiser on your skin regularly.
- > You are far less likely to develop skin problems if you take good care of your skin, and have healthy blood glucose, blood pressure and blood cholesterol (lipids) levels.



Bacterial infections

Several kinds of bacterial infections occur in people with diabetes, including:

- > styes, which are infections of the glands of the eyelid
- > boils, which are infections of the hair follicles
- > carbuncles, which are deep infections of the skin and the tissue underneath

Infections can also occur around the nails.

Infected tissues are usually hot, swollen, red, and painful. Several different organisms can cause infections. The most common ones are the Staphylococcus bacteria, also sometimes called Staph.

Health professionals believe people with diabetes can reduce their chances of these infections in several ways (see “Good Skin Care” below).

If you think you have a bacterial infection, see your doctor.

Fungal infections

Fungal infections in people with diabetes are often caused by the yeast-like fungus called *Candida Albicans* (or thrush). It can create itchy rashes of moist, red areas surrounded by tiny blisters and scales. These infections often occur in warm, moist folds of the skin.

Other common fungal infections include athlete's foot, ringworm (a ring-shaped itchy patch), and vaginal infection that causes itching.

If you think you have a yeast or fungal infection, call your doctor. You will need to have it diagnosed before you can treat it.

Problem areas are:

- > in the mouth
- > under the breasts
- > around the nails
- > between fingers and toes
- > in the corners of the mouth
- > under the foreskin (in uncircumcised men)
- > in the armpits and groin
- > in the vagina in women

Allergic Reactions

Allergic skin reactions can occur in response to medicines. See your doctor if you think you are having a reaction to a medicine. Look for rashes appearing after you have commenced a new medicine.

Itching

Localised itching is often caused by diabetes. It can be caused by a yeast infection, dry skin, or poor circulation. When poor circulation is the cause, the itchiest areas may be the lower parts of the legs.

You may be able to reduce itching yourself. Take care not to rub the skin hard when bathing or showering. Use mild soap with moisturiser and apply a light moisturising skin cream after bathing.

Dry Skin

Rough, dry and scaly skin affects most people with diabetes over the age of 60. Dry skin can be found on particular parts of the body, such as the legs, feet, hands and/or face. Or it can progress to all parts of the skin. In more serious cases the skin loses its suppleness, cracks and becomes red and inflamed.

Itching is the most obvious symptom. Aside from irritation, dry skin can be made worse if you scratch and rub it as it leads to infection, or even ulcers.

Often dry skin is caused by things we cannot control. It often happens in winter because:

- > heating your house can lower the humidity (amount of moisture in the air) which can lead to drying
- > cold, dry winter winds tend to dry the skin

Good skin care

There are several things you can do to reduce the risk of skin problems:

- > **Keep your blood glucose levels in as healthy a range as you can.** When your blood glucose levels are high you are prone to dry skin and are less able to fend off harmful bacteria. This can increase your risk of infection.
- > **Keep your skin clean and dry.** Use talcum powder or anti-chaffing cream in areas where skin touches skin, such as armpits and groin.
- > **Protect your skin.** For example, wear gloves when using cleaners, solvents and other household detergents.
- > **Avoid very hot baths and showers.** If your skin is dry don't use bubble baths. Moisturising soaps may help. Afterward, use a light moisturising skin cream but avoid putting lotions between your toes, as that can encourage fungus to grow.
- > **Where possible prevent dry skin.** If you scratch dry or itchy skin it can open up and infection can set in. Moisturise your skin to keep it supple and prevent chapping especially in cold or windy weather.
- > **Treat cuts right away.** Wash minor cuts with soap and water. Do not use alcohol or iodine to clean skin because they are too harsh. Only use an antibiotic cream or ointment if your doctor says it's okay. Cover minor cuts with sterile gauze. See a doctor if you get a major cut, burn, or infection. If you have nerve damage or poor circulation in your feet consult a doctor immediately if you get any sort of cut on your feet.
- > **During cold, dry months, keep your home more humid.**
- > **Use mild shampoos and unscented soaps.** Do not use hygiene sprays.
- > **See a dermatologist (skin doctor) about skin problems** if you or your doctor are concerned.
- > **Take good care of your feet.** Check them everyday for sores and cuts. Wear broad, flat shoes that fit well. Check your shoes for foreign objects before putting them on.



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.