

10 early signs of diabetes and when to see a healthcare provider

By [BRIANNA BELL](#) | NOVEMBER 6, 2020

Have you noticed that you're excessively thirsty lately—and going to the bathroom nonstop? Chances are it's happened to you at some point for one reason or another. But what you may not realize is that when these two symptoms are chronic, it can be signs of diabetes, a condition where your blood sugar is out of control.

More than 100 million Americans are living with either diabetes or prediabetes, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC)—and most of them don't know they have it. That's because many miss the early signs of diabetes, either because early symptoms of diabetes can be so mild they're unnoticeable or they don't know what to look for.

What are the different types of diabetes?

"Normally, the body uses insulin to help muscle and fat cells take up glucose (a type of sugar) to use as energy," says [Erica Weitzner](#), MD, an endocrinologist at Summit Medical Group in New Jersey. When you develop diabetes, your body stops using insulin effectively, which allows sugar to build up in your bloodstream.

- **Type 1 diabetes** occurs when your pancreas fails to produce insulin—the immune system destroys the cells that produce it. Previously known as juvenile diabetes, it can occur at any age.
- **Type 2 diabetes** occurs when your "cells do not respond as well to insulin as they should, and additional insulin is required to achieve the same effect as before," Dr. Weitzner explains. It mainly affects adults.
- **Prediabetes** occurs when your blood sugar levels are higher than normal, but not high enough to be diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes.
- **Gestational diabetes** occurs when a pregnant woman's hormones affect her ability to produce enough insulin for her body. Around [7%](#) of women develop gestational diabetes.

10 signs you have diabetes

There are 10 main early signs of diabetes according to the [Juvenile Diabetes Research](#) foundation:

1. **Frequent urination:** When you're visiting the bathroom more often than usual, it can mean that your kidneys are trying to eliminate excess sugar from your blood.
2. **Extreme thirst:** You lose a lot of water when you're using the restroom all the time. That can lead to dehydration and trigger feelings of excessive thirst, which will likely lead to drinking more fluids (and going to the bathroom more).
3. **Dry mouth or dry skin:** Dehydration can make your mouth feel like a desert and make your skin feel tight or itchy.
4. **Fatigue or weakness:** Extreme weakness, lethargy, or sleepiness can be signs that your blood sugar is out of whack. This can cause dizziness—or even fainting—if your blood sugar becomes dangerously high or low. Some people become so weak that they lose consciousness and are unable to regain consciousness again. This is sometimes referred to as a [diabetic coma](#), and it can be a life-threatening complication.
5. **Increased appetite or unexplained weight loss:** If your body is unable to get enough energy from processing the sugar in the food that you're eating you may notice an unusual increase in your appetite or even sudden and unexplained weight loss.

6. **Slow-healing cuts:** High blood sugar levels can stiffen your blood vessels, which makes it harder for blood to move around your body. Poor circulation means that little scratches or sores heal more slowly.
7. **Yeast infections:** Yeast feeds on sugar. When there's too much glucose circulating in your body, it can cause an overgrowth of yeast—for men and women.
8. **Pain or numbness in extremities:** Nerve damage occurs in diabetic patients, due to high blood sugar and higher levels of fat. That can cause nerve damage, also known as [diabetic neuropathy](#). You might notice tingling in your hands and feet. Nerve damage can also affect internal organs, such as your bladder.
9. **Vision changes:** Changes in eyesight can be a precursor to [diabetic eye disease](#). Untreated diabetes, or poorly managed diabetes, can lead to problems with vision, and even blindness.
10. **Fruity, or sweet-smelling breath:** When your body is trying to eliminate excess sugar, it can make your breath smell sweet because of high ketones.

“Type 1 diabetes can appear very suddenly with only a few days or weeks of symptoms or feeling sick,” Dr. Weitzner says. “Sometimes diabetes symptoms start suddenly in Type 2 diabetes; but it is usually more slowly progressing with some people having symptoms for months before they are diagnosed.” There is also the incidence of pancreatic diabetes, which [sometimes occurs](#) after removal of the pancreas.

The warning signs for diabetes may depend on the type of diabetes you are developing. The [American Diabetes Association](#) and [American Pregnancy Association](#) provide a thorough and detailed explanation of symptoms for the different types of diabetes, below is a condensed summary.

Symptom	Type 1 diabetes	Type 2 diabetes	Prediabetes	Gestational diabetes
Frequent Urination	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extreme thirst	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dry mouth or dry skin	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fatigue or weakness	✓	✓	✓	✓
Increased appetite or unexplained weight loss*	✓	✓	✓	✓
Slow-healing cuts	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yeast infections	✓	✓		
Pain or numbness in extremities		✓	✓	
Vision changes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fruity, or sweet-smelling breath	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Unexplained weight loss is most commonly a sign of Type 1 diabetes.*

What does undiagnosed diabetes feel like?

In addition to the symptoms above, you might feel foggy or generally off-kilter if you are developing diabetes. “A lot of times I get complaints that my patients just feel off,” explains [Patrick McEneaney](#), DPM, a podiatrist with a specialty in diabetes foot care in Chicago and the CEO of Northern Illinois Foot and Ankle Specialists. Feeling light-headed, dizzy, weak, nauseous, and thirsty can make you feel unwell—and these are all signs of diabetes.

What are the risk factors for diabetes?

If you're at high risk of diabetes, you'll need to be even more vigilant about the early symptoms of diabetes.

Type 1 diabetes risk factors

According to the [CDC](#), family history and young age can increase your risk for Type 1 diabetes. “Family history plays a big role; if your parents or other people in your family have diabetes, you have a higher risk of developing diabetes,” explains Dr. Weitzner.

Type 2 diabetes risk factors

You may be at high risk for developing [Type 2 diabetes](#) if you:

- Are overweight or obese
- Are 45 years of age or older
- Have a family history of diabetes, heart disease, or stroke
- Have high blood pressure or low levels of HDL, or “good” cholesterol
- Live an inactive lifestyle
- Were previously diagnosed with gestational diabetes, depression, or polycystic ovary syndrome (POC)
- You gave birth to a baby that weighed nine or more pounds.

If you are Black, Hispanic, Native American, Latino, or Asian, you are at a higher risk for Type 2 diabetes and gestational diabetes. The risk factors for prediabetes are the same as the risk factors for Type 2 diabetes.

Gestational diabetes risk factors

According to [The Mayo Clinic](#), you’re at higher risk of developing gestational diabetes if you:

- Are older than 25
- Have a family history of Type 2 diabetes
- Have a personal history with diabetes
- Were overweight before getting pregnant

When to see a diabetes healthcare specialist

It’s a good idea to go to your primary care provider if you have any of the early warning signs of diabetes.

“If you suspect you have diabetes, the first step would be to make an appointment with your primary care physician, such as your family practitioner, internist or pediatrician,” says [Soma Mandal](#), MD, of Summit Medical Group in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey.

“They would speak with you about what symptoms you are having, discuss your family medical history, and what your lifestyle is like.” It’s important to note: “If someone has been having increased thirst and urination, then develops nausea and vomiting, they may need to go to the hospital because very high sugars can be dangerous,” Dr. Weitzner says.

Prediabetes and an early stage of Type 2 diabetes is typically managed by your primary care provider, says Dr. Weitzner, but they will likely send you for diabetes testing, which includes a blood test that is typically done twice to confirm the results. “During pregnancy, or at other times, testing for diabetes may involve drinking something very sweet and having your blood sugar checked before you drink it and a few times after you drink it,” she explains.

If you are diagnosed with diabetes, there are a few different specialists that you may see, including an endocrinologist, a healthcare provider that specializes in treating diabetes.

You may also see a podiatrist, also known as a foot doctor, because foot care is important for any individual diagnosed with diabetes. Foot care and check-ups can help to prevent and treat ulcers (open sores) on the feet—one of the most common complications of diabetes, as well as more severe issues like neuropathy. Or, you may visit an ophthalmologist, also known as an eye doctor. [Diabetic retinopathy](#) is a condition that some patients with diabetes may experience, where small blood vessels are damaged and may lead to blurry vision and eventually vision loss. Anyone with diabetes should see their eye doctor annually. If you’re experiencing symptoms, don’t wait for your annual visit—call your healthcare provider right away.