

DIABETES: THE LINKS WITH HEART DISEASE AND STROKE

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a disorder caused by the lack of the hormone insulin, which disturbs the body's ability to store or use glucose (the source of energy that comes from carbohydrates and sugars). There are 2 types of diabetes, Type 1 (insulin-dependent) and Type 2 (also known as maturity onset or non-insulin dependent diabetes). Type 1 usually affects younger people, whereas Type 2 tends to develop gradually after the age of 40 and is much more common.

You are more likely to develop diabetes if you have one or more of the following risk factors:

- Being overweight
- Physical inactivity
- Family history of diabetes
- Previous diabetes during pregnancy
- Being of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin

About 2.5 million people in the UK have been diagnosed with having diabetes, and it is estimated that there are at least another 1 million people who have the disorder but are unaware of it.

How is it treated?

- Treatment for Type 1 diabetes involves having insulin injections every day. There are many different types of insulin and the best regime will be worked out for you depending on your age and lifestyle.
- Type 2 diabetes may be controlled by diet alone or with diet and tablets. There are several different groups of drugs used for diabetes. Your GP will prescribe the most suitable one for you.
- Diet plays an important role in both types, particularly in controlling the intake of carbohydrates and sugars. Eating a healthy, varied diet is very important for further risk reduction.



HEAD OFFICE

Rosebery House, 9 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 5EZ
Tel: 0131 225 6963 Fax: 0131 220 6313 Advice Line: 0845 077 6000
E-mail: admin@chss.org.uk Website: www.chss.org.uk

Scottish Charity No. SCO18761

How is diabetes linked to heart disease and stroke?

- Diabetes is one of the major risk factors for heart disease and stroke.
- People who have diabetes are between 2 and 5 times more likely to develop heart disease and stroke than people who do not.
- Uncontrolled diabetes contributes to damage to the blood vessels and the build-up of fatty deposits in the arteries, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.
- People who have Type 2 diabetes are more likely to have high LDL (“bad”) cholesterol which is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke.
- People who have Type 2 diabetes are also more likely to have high blood pressure another risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

So you can see that diabetes increases the risk of stroke and heart disease, especially if any other risk factors are already present. The risks multiply.

The good news is that there are things you can do to control your diabetes, reduce your risks and stay healthy.

See the CHSS booklets ‘Reducing the risk of heart disease’ and ‘Reducing the risk of stroke’.

Preventative treatment

As well as treatment for diabetes it may also be recommended that you take low dose aspirin daily (75mg) as a preventative measure against heart disease and stroke.

This usually includes adults with Type 2 diabetes who are 50 or over, and some younger people with increased cardiovascular risk such as having high blood pressure high cholesterol and life style factors such as smoking. Your doctor will discuss these risks with you and prescribe treatment accordingly.

What are the symptoms of diabetes?

In Type 1 diabetes, the symptoms develop quickly over a few weeks, but Type 2 diabetes develops gradually over many years. You may experience some or all of the following symptoms:

- Thirst
- Passing more urine than normal (especially at night)
- Tiredness
- Weight loss
- Blurred vision
- Genital itching (or regular episodes of thrush)

How is diabetes diagnosed?

If you are aware of symptoms the simplest test is a urine test. This is sometimes done routinely for other reasons and detects undiagnosed diabetes.

If a high level of sugar is found in the sample it shows that sugar is not being dealt with properly by the body. Your doctor may also do a screening blood test, by pricking

your finger. This will give a snapshot of how high your blood sugar level is. If this indicates there may be a problem you may be asked to return to the surgery for a fasting blood glucose test. This involves having blood taken first of all when you have had nothing to eat overnight and then at intervals after taking a very sugary drink (the glucose). The results will show how your body responded to the glucose. Depending on the severity of the diabetes you may be asked to attend the diabetic clinic at your local hospital. Even if you do not have any symptoms you may still have diabetes, so if you have any of the other risk factors for heart disease and stroke you should ask your doctor for a screening blood test.

What can I do to help myself?

- Monitor and control your diabetes yourself by checking your blood glucose levels, testing your urine and attend the doctor or clinic regularly. (Blood glucose levels should be between 4-6mmols/l before meals and less than 10mmols/l 2 hours after meals).
- Give up smoking (ask your practice nurse about smoking cessation classes in your area). Smoking is major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.
- Have your blood pressure checked annually, and treated if necessary: for people with diabetes the level for treatment is set lower at 130/80.
- Have your cholesterol checked and treated if necessary. The recommended level for total cholesterol is under 4mmol/l (LDL cholesterol should be under 2mmol/l, HDL cholesterol should be >1.0 mmol/l in men and >1.2 mmol/l in women and triglyceride level under 1.7mmol/l).
- Aim for a healthy weight for your height with a Body Mass Index of less than 25 - your doctor will calculate your BMI, which expresses adult weight in relation to height and indicates whether you need to lose weight to control your diabetes.
- Cut down on saturated fats e.g. animal fats, pastries, biscuits, full fat dairy products.
- Eat a healthy varied diet including cereals, beans, pulses, and 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Reduce your salt intake to 6g of salt or 2.3 g of sodium (equivalent to a teaspoon of table salt a day).
- Limit your alcohol intake to 2 units for women and 3 units for men per day. However it is advisable to avoid binge-drinking and to have some days of each week alcohol free.
- Take regular exercise: It is recommended that adults should aim to take at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days. This can be an accumulation of any simple activity such as walking or using the stairs as well as regular swimming, dancing or cycling etc.
- Learn to deal with stress where possible, get the support you need, and learn relaxation techniques.
- It is very important to look after your feet. Attend any chiropody clinic appointments as requested. Check your feet and toenails every time you bathe or shower. Report any cuts or problems to your chiropodist or nurse as soon as possible.

- You should have an annual review with your doctor to check your long-term glucose control, blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, general circulation, and that you are not developing any of the complications of diabetes, (including eye, nerve, kidney and cardiovascular disease). There may also be a diabetic health visitor in your area who will help to monitor your condition and give you support and advice.

Where can I get more information?

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland
Rosebery House
9 Haymarket Terrace
Edinburgh EH12 5EZ
Tel: 0131 225 6963
Advice Line: 0845 077 6000
Website: www.chss.org.uk

Diabetes UK
49 Bath Street
Glasgow
G2 2DG
Tel: 0141 245 6380
Fax: 0141 248 2107
Email: scotland@diabetes.org.uk
Careline: 0845 120 2960
Website: www.diabetes.org.uk

Diabetes UK Scotland is dedicated to putting the interests of people with diabetes first, through the best in campaigning, research and care.

NHS 24
Tel: 0845 424 2424
Textphone: 1 8001 0845 424 2424
24 hour telephone health advice and information service

FACTSHEET

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line

Monday – Friday 9.30am – 4.00pm

0845 077 6000

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