

Diabetes Myths

There are many myths about diabetes, which can leave you feeling confused. Here we tell the truth behind some of the common myths.

Myth no. 1

All people with diabetes are overweight or obese

There are 2 main types of diabetes: type 1 and type 2.

Type 1 diabetes is a condition where the body attacks the cells that produce insulin in the pancreas, so it stops making insulin altogether. It is not caused by lifestyle factors such as a poor diet and lack of exercise.

Type 2 diabetes is a condition where the body still produces insulin but it is not working as well as it should.

Being overweight and inactive are major risks for developing type 2 diabetes. About 85% of people diagnosed with type 2 diabetes are overweight or obese. The rest are not overweight.

Myth no. 2

People with type 2 diabetes bring diabetes on themselves

There are many factors which increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, some things can't be changed such as:

- Having a family history of diabetes
- Being of certain backgrounds - Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, Pacific Islander, Southern European, Middle Eastern, Northern African and Southern Asian
- Your age

There are some things that can be changed such as:

- Losing weight around the stomach if you are overweight
- Being more active and sitting less
- Eating more healthily
- Lowering your cholesterol and blood pressure
- Not smoking

Note:

Some medicines used to treat mental health conditions can increase a person's risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

There are many people who are overweight or obese and do not develop type 2 diabetes because their genetic risk is not high.

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Myth no. 3

Diabetes is very serious only when someone takes insulin to manage it

Diabetes is a serious condition whether someone needs insulin or not. Taking insulin is another form of diabetes treatment just like taking other diabetes medication to manage blood glucose levels. Keeping blood glucose levels within target range can help prevent complications such as eye and kidney disease.

Myth no. 4

Type 2 diabetes becomes type 1 diabetes when you start insulin

Type 1 and type 2 diabetes are different conditions with different causes. Fifty per cent of people with type 2 diabetes will need insulin after 6–10 years of being diagnosed with diabetes because the pancreas produces less insulin over time. This does not mean that they now have type 1 diabetes. You still have type 2 diabetes but now need insulin to manage it.

Myth no. 5

Children with type 1 diabetes can grow out of the condition

Type 1 diabetes is a life-long condition that children do not grow out of. At this point there is no cure – so once someone has type 1 diabetes they have it for the rest of their lives.

Someone who has type 1 diabetes has inherited a gene that can cause type 1 diabetes. Twenty per cent of people diagnosed with type 1 diabetes have another family member with the condition. The other 80% do not have anyone in their family with the condition. Something in the environment (for example, a virus) triggers an 'autoimmune' response in people who have the type 1 gene to attack and destroy the cells of the pancreas which make insulin.

Myth no. 6

If someone with diabetes is given sugar to eat they could die

Although too much sugar is not good for anybody whether they have diabetes or not, sugar is NOT dangerous for people with diabetes. In some cases it may be even lifesaving.

Sometimes people with diabetes who take insulin and/or certain diabetes medicine can have low blood glucose levels (also called hypoglycaemia or hypo). A hypo is a blood glucose level below 4.0mmol/L and needs to be treated straight away by eating 15 grams of quick acting carbohydrate (glucose or sugar) such as a glass of lemonade. If low blood glucose is not treated straight away the person may become unconscious.

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Myth no. 7

Diabetes is contagious so people shouldn't get too close to people with diabetes

Some people think you can catch diabetes by sharing food or having sex but the truth is that diabetes is not contagious.

Myth no. 8

People with diabetes can't live normal lives

People with diabetes live normal lives day in, day out. They go to school or university, have jobs, travel, play sport and socialise like anyone else without diabetes. In fact, unless they told you, you wouldn't know that they had diabetes. They do however need to do many things to keep healthy – such as checking their blood glucose levels, taking medications or insulin, treating low blood glucose levels (hypoglycaemia) if they occur and seeing their doctor for regular diabetes checks.

Myth no. 9

Do mothers with type 1 automatically have babies with diabetes?

No. The chance that the child of a woman with type 1 diabetes will also develop type 1 diabetes is about 1 in 25 to 1 in 100.

Myth no. 10

People with diabetes need others to look after them

Most people with diabetes can look after themselves. Children with diabetes usually need help and support from their parents or teachers. Older adults may also need extra help to manage their diabetes. Support from family and friends is important for everyone.

If you would like more information about your diabetes, see a Credentialed Diabetes Educator. To find a diabetes educator in your area, contact your community health centre, the Australian Diabetes Educators Association (www.adea.com.au) or call the **Diabetes Victoria Helpline on 1300 437 386**.