

You may have wondered why doctors talk so much about keeping blood sugar levels in a healthy range. Here's why: Long-term diabetes problems — sometimes called complications — are often linked to higher blood sugar levels over a long period of time. These complications can affect several different parts of the body.

Many of the complications of diabetes don't show up until after many years — even decades — of having the disease. They usually develop silently and gradually over time, so even if people with diabetes aren't having any signs of complications, they may still eventually develop them.



What Parts of the Body May Develop Complications

Eye Problems

People with diabetes have a greater risk of developing eye problems, including:

- **Cataracts:** A cataract is a thickening and clouding of the lens of the eye. The lens is the part of the eye that helps you focus on what you see. Cataracts can make a person's vision blurry or make it hard to see at night.

Doctors think that people with diabetes are more likely to develop cataracts if they have high blood sugar levels over a long period of time. If cataracts get in the way of seeing properly, a person can have surgery to remove them.

- **Retinopathy:** Another eye problem, called **diabetic retinopathy**, involves changes in the retina, the light-sensitive layer at the back of the eye. These changes happen because of damage or growth problems in the small blood vessels of the retina. Usually, changes in the retinal blood vessels don't appear before a person has reached puberty and has had diabetes for several years. Retinopathy is more likely to become a problem in people with diabetes if they have high blood sugar levels over a long period of time, if they have high blood pressure, or if they use smoke or chew tobacco.

One reason why teens with diabetes is because people with retinopathy first. But if the condition gets worse, develops retinal problems, he or she often. A person with diabetes may be caused by retinopathy by improving becomes more advanced, laser treatment may be needed to help prevent vision loss.



need to have regular yearly eye exams may not have any problems seeing at they can become blind. If a person will need to visit the eye doctor more able to slow or reverse the damage blood sugar control. If retinopathy

- **Glaucoma:** People who have diabetes also have a greater chance of getting glaucoma. In this disease, pressure builds up inside the eye, which can decrease blood flow to the retina and optic nerve and damage them. At first, a person may not have trouble seeing. But if it's not treated, glaucoma can cause a person to lose vision. The risk increases as a person gets older and has had diabetes longer. People with glaucoma take medications to lower the pressure inside the eye and sometimes need surgery.

Keeping your blood sugar and blood pressure levels under control and avoiding tobacco may also help you avoid eye problems associated with diabetes.

Nerve Damage

Another complication that people who have had diabetes for a long time may develop is a type of nerve damage called **diabetic neuropathy**.

Diabetic neuropathy can affect nerves in many different parts of the body. The most common early symptoms of the condition are numbness, tingling, or sharp pains in the feet or lower legs.

If it's not treated, nerve damage can cause a number of problems. For example, because of the numbness, people with nerve damage might not realize that they have a cut, and it could become seriously infected before they discover it. Because nerve damage can happen anywhere in the body, problems can occur in almost any organ system, including the digestive tract, urinary system, eyes, and heart.

Doctors usually diagnose nerve damage by giving a person a physical exam. A biopsy of nerve tissue or other special tests may also be necessary. The doctor might also recommend the patient see a neurologist (nerve specialist).

Heart and Blood Vessel Diseases

People with diabetes have a higher risk of developing certain problems with the heart and blood vessels. Some of these problems are:

- heart attack (caused by a blockage of the blood vessels supplying blood to the heart)
- stroke (caused by a blockage of the blood vessels supplying the brain)
- blockage of blood vessels in the legs and feet, which can lead to foot ulcers, infections, and even loss of a toe, foot, or lower leg



How well a person controls his or her blood sugar probably plays a role in heart and blood vessel problems, too. And if a person smokes, is obese, has abnormal levels of blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, or a family history of heart attack or stroke before age 50, he or she definitely has a higher risk of these problems. In addition, smoking increases the risk of heart and blood vessel problems, as well as other diabetes complications.

Foot Problems

After a person has had diabetes for many years, he or she can develop foot problems because of poor blood flow in the feet and nerve damage. Smoking can increase the risk of foot problems or make them worse.

