



Diabetes & Infections: What You Need to Know to Stay Healthy?

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An ounce of prevention

People with diabetes whose blood sugar is poorly managed are more prone to infections that can begin with chronic low-grade inflammation, decreased sensation, and slow-to-heal wounds that lead to more serious issues. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so follow these tips to develop an effective anti-infection regimen.

What to watch out for

Uncontrolled glucose levels can make ordinary diseases out-of-the ordinary.

Infections

Ear, nose and throat infections that are fungal in nature can often cause problems for people with diabetes because the yeast bacteria that causes them feeds on sugar.

Viruses

If you have high blood sugar from your diabetes and your immune system is compromised, you can also be affected more severely by **common influenza and pneumonia viruses**, which is why it is essential that you keep up to date on your vaccines.

Urinary Tract Infections

People with diabetes have a higher risk of **urinary tract infections** (UTIs) as well as bladder and kidney infections, and they can be more severe than those experienced by people who don't have diabetes.

Why are people with diabetes more prone to infection?

As with so much else when it comes to diabetes, poor blood sugar control—specifically high blood sugar—is usually the culprit. Too much glucose in your blood over extended periods of time can weaken your immune system, leaving you prone to respiratory infections as well as peripheral nerve damage that can affect your feet in particular. High blood sugar levels also allow bacteria to grow more quickly, so people are often surprised at how a small cut that doesn't heal can rapidly turn into a much larger problem.

Skin Complications

Bacterial infections often cause **skin complications** for people with diabetes because of weakened immune systems and impaired blood flow. (Insulin itself can occasionally cause allergic reactions.) Many of these skin issues are persistent but not serious, but a few can be problematic. All should be seen by your dermatologist.

Gum Disease

It is not something people ordinary associate with diabetes, but it can be a problem. Saliva in our mouths helps protect our teeth and gums by clearing away food particles and bacteria, but people with elevated glucose levels make less saliva and the saliva their bodies do produce has more sugar in it, causing the bacterial growth that can lead to tooth decay and gum disease

Soft Tissue Infections

Due, once again, to high blood sugar, poor immune response and neuropathy, are especially prevalent in people with diabetes (one national study has called STIs “a significant disease burden”). These affect legs and feet in particular and can lead to in extreme cases to amputation.

Don't ignore your brain.

Frequent hyperglycemic episodes can stress your brain and ultimately cause diseases like vascular dementia. On the other end of the scale, low blood sugar (symptoms may include feeling dizzy or shaky) can be equally problematic. **If you are experiencing problems with depression, memory or attention, call your doctor.**

What can you do?

Here's the good news: You will likely be able to alleviate these problems or avoid them entirely by following these simple steps as part of your diabetes management program. If you are already taking these precautions, more power to you.

- 1. Do your best to make sure your blood sugar levels are well-controlled.**
- 2. This is not exact science necessarily, and life happens, but if you don't already, consider your blood sugar number your one priority.** Seek help from your medical team if your glucose remains consistently high.
- 3. Take your medications as prescribed.**
- 4. Keep all your regular medical appointments, including dental visits.**
- 5. Get all of your vaccines,** which can help alleviate issues caused by flu, RSV, and COVID. These may also include the shingles vaccine, if you are 50 or over, and the pneumococcal vaccine. Normally, the latter is recommended only if you are 65 or older, but diabetes is considered an important risk factor, so talk to your doctor about whether you should have this vaccine.
- 6. Wash your hands frequently,** which can help keep down the spread of bacteria.
- 7. Exercise regularly,** at least 150 minutes a week, which is important to help manage your blood sugar levels and can help build your immune system.
- 8. Wear good shoes that don't constrict your feet.** Put on clean socks every day. And **examine your feet at least once a day.**
- 9. When your stress levels are high,** your body has a more difficult time fighting off infections. Yoga, meditation, and continued exercise can help you manage stress
- 10. Sleeplessness is an issue that affects millions of Americans, with diabetes or not. But it is truly important in terms of being able to fight off infections. If you find yourself suffering from continual, rather than occasional, insomnia, check in with your doctor.**

Pro tip:

Don't ignore issues that arise. Most things don't go away just because you'd like them to. **So be safe rather than sorry and call your medical team!**



Sources: | <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/diabetes-complications/diabetes-immune-system.html> | <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK669326/> | <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/link-between-type-2-diabetes-and-infection> | <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=uq1148abc> | <https://diabetes.org/about-diabetes/complications/skin-complications> | <https://diabetes.org/about-diabetes/complications/oral-gum-disease> | <https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2021/1000/p386.html> | <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11229204/>

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