



Women and diabetes

Although diabetes can have a huge impact on the quality of life of men and women, this article focuses on how the condition can affect you as a woman during pregnancy and in your sex life.

Diabetes is a long-term condition that is caused by too much glucose (sugar) in the blood¹. It's thought to affect around 2.3 million people in the UK and experts believe that another half a million more people have the condition but are not aware of it¹. Diabetes occurs when our bodies can't use glucose effectively for energy¹.

Type 1 diabetes

This affects between five and 15 percent of people with diabetes and usually develops early in life, and certainly before we hit 40^{1,2}.

To avoid long term complications people with diabetes need to ensure their blood glucose stays within normal limits. Insulin injections will be required for life together with a healthy diet and regular blood tests.

Doctors are unsure about the cause, but they do understand that the immune system attacks cells in the pancreas, stopping insulin production^{1,2}.

Type 2 diabetes

Type 2 diabetes happens when we don't produce enough insulin to utilise glucose, or if our bodies' cells don't react to insulin, known as insulin resistance^{1,2}.

Some people with type 2 diabetes can control symptoms by eating a healthy diet and monitoring their blood glucose^{1,2}. To avoid long term complications people with diabetes need to ensure their blood glucose stays within normal limits. They may need to take tablets or insulin injections as the condition progresses.

Type 2 can be known as maturity onset diabetes as it's more common among older people and is often associated with obesity^{1,2}.

Gestational diabetes

Some women have such high levels of glucose in their blood during pregnancy that their body cannot produce enough insulin to utilise it all^{1,2}. It affects around

5-10 percent of pregnant women. If you have type 1 or type 2 diabetes, pregnancy can make it harder to control^{1,2}.

There's a risk that your unborn baby may be affected, so it is important to keep blood glucose levels under control^{1,2}. It usually develops in the second half of pregnancy and disappears after the baby is born. But an estimated 50% of women risk developing type 2 diabetes later on in life.

Hypoglycaemia during pregnancy

In pregnant women with diabetes insulin requirements change in early pregnancy and this can lead to severe hypoglycaemia ("hypos") and changes in the normal warning signs. This means that hypos often happen fast and without enough warning to treat the early symptoms.

There's a risk that the unborn baby may be affected, so it is important to keep blood glucose levels under control^{1,2}. Keeping blood glucose within the normal, healthy range (3.5 and 5.9 mmol/L and HbA1c less than 6.1%)¹ can help to reduce the chances of miscarriage, and the baby developing abnormalities.

It is important for women with diabetes to test their blood glucose regularly to make sure they are within this range for at least 3 months prior to becoming pregnant, and throughout the pregnancy. It is important to use a meter suitable for use in pregnancy and to choose a No Coding meter* to ensure the blood glucose results are as accurate as possible. (*A No Coding meter ensures accuracy when testing your blood glucose readings as it ensures that the correct code is automatically set any time a new test strip is inserted – so there are fewer steps and less chance for inaccurate results due to a miscoded meter.)

Symptoms of diabetes

They include¹:

- thirst
- urinating a lot
- extreme tiredness
- weight loss and muscle wasting
- feeling itchy around the vagina
- blurred vision

With type 2 diabetes, some people may not experience any symptoms, or very few¹. They can develop over weeks, or months so you may not realise you're unwell for a while¹.

Sexual problems

One of the long-term complications of diabetes is that both men and women can experience sexual problems which can put great strain on relationships^{1,2}.

If a man has diabetes, problems might include¹:

- impotence
- ejaculation problems

If a woman has diabetes, she could experience¹:

- vaginal dryness
- painful intercourse
- less vaginal sensitivity
- difficulty climaxing
- loss of sex drive

These problems are often caused by damage to blood vessels or nerves, resulting from poorly controlled blood glucose. Obesity, tiredness, depression, urinary tract infections, yeast infections and an overactive bladder are factors that can also contribute to sexual problems^{1,2}.

Self-help

Certain factors can increase your chance of developing Type 2 diabetes¹:

- A close member of your family has Type 2 diabetes
- You're overweight
- You've had a heart attack or a stroke or you have high blood pressure
- You have polycystic ovary syndrome and you are overweight.
- You have impaired glucose tolerance or impaired fasting glycaemia.
- If you've had gestational diabetes.
- You have severe mental health problems.
- The more risk factors that apply to you, the greater your risk of having diabetes.

You may be able to reduce your chances of developing Type 2 diabetes if you^{1,2}:

- maintain a healthy diet and weight
- keep your waist size under 31.5 inches (80cm) as a woman
- get at least 30 minutes of exercise every day
- stop smoking
- control your blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- only drink alcohol in moderation

Further information:

Diabetes UK

www.diabetes.org.uk

References:

1. Diabetes UK

www.diabetes.org.uk

2. NHS Clinical Knowledge Summary

http://cks.library.nhs.uk/diabetes_type_2#-350383

3. National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

Diabetes in pregnancy: Management of diabetes and its complications from pre-conception to postnatal period. Clinical Guidance 63. London: NICE; March 2008. Available online at: www.nice.org.uk

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

© Copyright Bayer plc 2009 Last reviewed: April 21st 2009 Doc ID: Oi99 Version: 1
