Understanding diabetes
Your key to better health
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- [Pfizer](#)
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How this booklet can help you

This booklet aims to help you if you:
- have just been diagnosed with diabetes
- are already living with diabetes and want to find out more about it
- are a parent, carer or friend of someone who has diabetes, or
- are interested in diabetes and would like to find out more.

The booklet will tell you about:
- diabetes, its symptoms and associated health problems (diabetes complications)
- what causes diabetes and who is most at risk
- how diabetes can be treated, and
- how you can help yourself to stay healthy.

It also explains how Diabetes UK can give you up-to-date information and support on all aspects of living with diabetes.

The good news about diabetes is that treatments are very effective and the more you know about your condition, the more you can do...
- to help yourself stay healthy
- to lead the sort of life you want to live, and
- to avoid the health problems associated with diabetes in later life.

Important
The information in this booklet should be used together with the personal advice you have received from your doctor or diabetes nurse. You will be encouraged to learn to make changes to treatment yourself, but if you are not sure what to do, talk to your doctor or diabetes nurse.
What is diabetes?

Diabetes describes a condition in which the body cannot make proper use of carbohydrate in food because the pancreas does not make enough insulin, or the insulin produced is ineffective, or a combination of both.

Insulin is the hormone that helps glucose (sugar) from the digestion of carbohydrate in food, move into the body's cells where it is used for energy. When insulin is not present or is ineffective, glucose builds up in the blood.

This is because insulin is the key, which unlocks the door to the body's cells. Once the door is unlocked glucose can enter where it is used as fuel for energy so we can work, play and generally live our lives.

If there is no insulin present in the body, as in Type 1 diabetes, then there is no key to unlock the door and the glucose stays in the blood.

Diabetes develops when glucose can't enter the body's cells to

Type 1 diabetes
...there is no key (insulin) to unlock the door to the cells.
When there is not enough insulin, the cell doors are only partially unlocked, or when there is lots of insulin but the lock doesn’t work properly (sometimes referred to as insulin resistance), this is Type 2 diabetes.

Because the excess glucose stays in the blood and isn’t being used as fuel for energy, people with untreated diabetes often feel very tired, pass large amounts of urine and are extremely thirsty.

As people with diabetes have problems with their insulin, it is necessary for them to take steps to either create insulin or to help the insulin they are making, work better. This can be done through a healthy lifestyle and treatment.

By following a treatment plan, which includes healthy diet and regular physical activity, people with diabetes can control the amount of glucose in the blood and lead a healthy life.

be used as fuel. This happens because either...

Type 2 diabetes
...the key is unable to unlock the door properly or
...the key is there, but the lock doesn’t work properly.
What are the symptoms of diabetes?

The main symptoms of diabetes are:

- increased thirst
- going to the loo all the time especially at night
- extreme tiredness
- weight loss
- genital itching or regular episodes of thrush
- slow healing of cuts and wounds
- blurred vision.

Type 2 diabetes develops slowly over a period of years. Some people may not notice any symptoms at all and their diabetes is only picked up in a routine medical check up. Some people may put the symptoms down to 'getting older' or 'overwork'.

Type 1 diabetes develops much more quickly, usually over a few weeks.

In both types of diabetes, the symptoms are quickly relieved once it is treated.

Early treatment will also reduce the chances of developing the serious diabetes complications described on page 18.
Who gets diabetes and what causes it?

Diabetes is a common health condition. About 1.8 million people in the UK are known to have diabetes. And for every person who knows that they have the condition, there is probably another person with diabetes who does not yet know. Over three-quarters of people with diabetes have Type 2 diabetes.

Although the condition can occur at any age, it is rare in infants and becomes more common as people get older.

Type 1 diabetes
Type 1 diabetes develops when the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas have been destroyed. Nobody knows for sure why these cells have been damaged but the most likely cause is the body having an abnormal reaction to the cells. This may be triggered by a viral or other infection. Type 1 diabetes used to be known as insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (IDDM).

People who develop diabetes under the age of 40 and especially in childhood, usually have this type of diabetes, however it can happen at any age.

Type 2 diabetes
Type 2 diabetes usually appears in middle-aged or older people, although more frequently it is being diagnosed in younger overweight people and is known to affect African-Carribean and South Asian people at a younger age. The main cause is that the insulin that the body produces doesn't work properly (insulin resistance).