

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a serious, lifelong condition in which the body cannot properly control the level of sugar (glucose) in the blood. Insulin is a hormone that regulates blood sugar levels. In people with diabetes, the body does not make enough insulin or can't use insulin as well as it should.

During digestion, carbohydrates from food are broken down into sugar, which is then absorbed into the bloodstream. In response to this absorption, the pancreas secretes insulin, allowing sugar to be absorbed from the blood into cells and tissues. Cells and tissues then use the sugar for energy. When you have diabetes, sugar builds up in your blood instead of being used for energy.

Diabetes increases your risk of early death, heart disease, heart attack, and stroke, as well as kidney, nerve, and eye damage.

Does diabetes increase my risk of stroke?

According to statistics from the American Diabetes Association, at least 65% of people with diabetes die from heart disease or stroke, yet more than half don't think they are at risk of stroke.¹ Many studies have shown that having diabetes increases a person's risk of stroke independently of any other risk factors. It has been estimated that about 40% of all strokes are related to the effects of diabetes,² and people with diabetes are 2 to 6 times more likely to have a stroke than people without diabetes—the same level of risk associated with already having cardiovascular disease.³

Both type 1 and type 2 diabetes increase your risk of stroke. In addition to the stroke risk caused by diabetes itself, many diabetics also have [high blood pressure](#) , [high cholesterol](#) and are [overweight](#) , all additional risk factors for stroke. Data from the Framingham Heart Study indicate that diabetes may have a greater impact on stroke risk in older women compared with men, though the reasons for this are not clear.

4

In addition to having increased risk of stroke, people with diabetes who have a stroke often fare worse than non-diabetic stroke victims—especially women. One study found that 16% of stroke deaths in men and 33% in women were attributable to diabetes.⁵

If you have diabetes, you can lower your risk of stroke by quitting [smoking](#) and keeping your blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol under control with [diet](#)

, [exercise](#)

, and medication. The closer your numbers are to the optimal range, the better your chances of preventing a stroke.

How does diabetes increase my stroke risk?

Diabetes increases your risk of stroke because the excess sugar in your blood causes blood vessel problems, making you more likely to have [high blood pressure](#) and [atherosclerosis](#) (hardening of the arteries). In addition, diabetes increases the risk of blood clots, which can cause both

[heart attack](#)

and

[stroke](#)

. The excess sugar in the blood has a direct effect on blood vessel walls, binding with and altering the structure of proteins and molecules that line the blood vessel, making the vessels thicker, less elastic, and more likely to initiate blood clots. Thicker and less elastic blood vessels means that blood has a harder time flowing through narrower openings, and will have to do so at a higher pressure. These changes cause tissue damage elsewhere in the body because other organs may not be receiving enough oxygen. Smaller spaces for blood to flow means a greater likelihood that a clot could completely block a vessel, causing a stroke or heart attack.

6

[Next: Types of Diabetes](#)

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