

HIV & DIABETES

WHAT IS DIABETES?

Diabetes is a disease that makes it hard for the body to convert food to energy. Some human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) medicines can increase a person's blood sugar levels (blood glucose) over time, which can eventually lead to type 2 diabetes.

There are two main forms of diabetes – type 1 and type 2. Type 1 diabetes usually affects children and young adults and is caused by the body's immune system attacking insulin-producing cells in the pancreas – known as an 'autoimmune disease.' Type 2 diabetes is more common and usually occurs in adults over 30. A person with type 2 diabetes may produce enough insulin but not use it effectively (insulin resistance) or they may not produce enough insulin. Eventually, they will develop high blood sugar levels and over time, damage to other body systems can result.

RISK FACTORS, SYMPTOMS AND RESISTANCE

Risk factors for diabetes include being overweight, lack of exercise or physical activity, and a family history of diabetes. Symptoms of diabetes include being thirsty, increased urination, unexplained weight loss or weight gain, and excessive tiredness. Diabetes, in turn, can lead to other problems if it is not controlled, such as heart disease, nerve damage, kidney damage, and blindness.

If a person is taking medicine for HIV, especially if they have one or more of the risk factors for diabetes, it is important to look out for the symptoms in order to treat a potential diabetes diagnosis as early as possible. It is thought that some HIV medicines make the body resistant to insulin, the hormone that helps the body process sugar, which is needed for energy. Symptoms of insulin resistance include drowsiness after meals, mood swings, or extreme hunger, but often people have no symptoms at all. Insulin resistance can lead to high cholesterol and triglyceride levels (high levels of fat in the blood).

MANAGEMENT AND TREATMENT

In many cases, type 2 diabetes can be controlled by eating a healthy diet, regular exercise (30 minutes most days of the week) and medication. A healthy diet is low in fat, salt, and sugar, and contains a range of vegetables and fruits, high fibre, and lean protein. A doctor may prescribe medicines if diet and exercise are not enough to lower the person's blood sugar to normal levels.