5 ways to reduce your risk of diabetes
A quick guide that could change your life.
Diabetes is Australia’s fastest growing chronic condition. Left untreated, it can lead to serious complications that can affect your heart, kidney, feet, eyes and quality of life. Every single step you can take to reduce your risk is worth taking! Here are five simple but powerful steps to get you started.
Step 1: Understand diabetes
Understanding what diabetes is and the different types of diabetes can help you care for yourself and understand how someone else may be affected.

Step 2: Know your risk
Have a look to see if you (or your loved ones) fit one or more of the criteria to be at risk of diabetes.

Step 3: Manage your risk
If you’ve discovered some early symptoms, or just want to make sure you reduce the likelihood of developing diabetes, find out what you can do.

Step 4: Eat healthy
Our guidelines for healthy eating is important for all Australians. By following these guidelines, you can reduce your risk of chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes.

Step 5: Act early
Being able to identify the signs and symptoms of diabetes can help with the early detection and diagnosis, reducing the risk of developing serious health complications.

Want to know more?
Turn over to find out more about diabetes, whether you’re at risk, ways to prevent type 2 and gestational diabetes, what you should eat, and how to be on the lookout for signs and symptoms.
What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a chronic condition that affects the way the body processes blood sugar, also known as glucose. For your body to work properly, you need to maintain a healthy level of glucose in your blood.

Glucose is your body’s main source of energy. It comes from the carbohydrate foods you eat, such as bread, pasta, rice, cereals, fruits, starchy vegetables, milk, yoghurt and processed foods. When these types of foods are eaten, your blood stream carries the glucose around your body, where your cells convert it into energy.

To break down the glucose so it can enter your cells, your body needs insulin, a hormone produced by your pancreas. If you have diabetes, it means your pancreas may either make too little or no insulin at all, or that the insulin your making is not working properly. The glucose you eat will then stay in your blood instead of being turned into energy.

Your body does not like high levels of glucose in your blood and can cause both short and long-term effects on different parts your body. Over time this can possibly cause damage to your heart, brain, kidneys, eyes and feet.
Type of Diabetes
There are three main types of diabetes: type 1, type 2 and gestational diabetes.

**Type 1 diabetes** is an autoimmune disease. If you have type 1 diabetes it means your pancreas no longer produces the insulin you need. This means you will need to regularly monitor your blood glucose levels and either inject insulin or use an insulin pump to keep those levels within a healthy range.

Type 1 diabetes is one of the most common chronic childhood conditions in developed nations like Australia. It is often diagnosed in childhood, but can develop at any age.

There is currently limited scientific understanding why the autoimmune response in the body is switched on, making prevention of type 1 diabetes currently not possible.

If you have **type 2 diabetes**, it means your pancreas is not producing enough insulin or the insulin you are producing is not working effectively. With regular physical activity, a healthy eating plan, and regular health checks, you can manage your diabetes to live well.

Type 2 Diabetes is a progressive condition. Over time you may need medication, and in some cases insulin, to manage your blood glucose levels.
Gestational diabetes is a condition you may develop during pregnancy. It will be diagnosed with a blood test and an oral glucose tolerance test when you are between 24 and 28 weeks pregnant. Gestational diabetes can be managed with diet and exercise, although some women may require medication or insulin until the baby is born.

**Gestational diabetes** usually disappears after the birth, although it may increase the likelihood that you will develop type 2 diabetes later in life.

You may also have heard of **pre-diabetes**. If you have been diagnosed with pre-diabetes, it means your blood glucose levels and insulin levels are higher than normal – but not yet high enough for a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes. Making lifestyle changes can help slow down the progression of pre-diabetes to type 2 diabetes.

Don’t take the risk. Ask your GP to test you for diabetes. It’s quick and easy.
Am I at risk of diabetes?

While there is no single cause of type 2 diabetes, there are well-established risk factors. Some risk factors can be modified while other factors are part of the genetics you were born with.

An estimated 2 million Australians are at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes, it’s also estimated there are 500,000 people living with silent, undiagnosed type 2 diabetes which may be damaging their bodies.

Pre-diabetes usually occurs in adults but younger people can also develop this condition, even children. Risk factors for pre-diabetes are the same as those for type 2 diabetes.

These include:

- Having a family history of type 2 diabetes
- Being above the healthy weight range
- Having an inactive lifestyle
- Having an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background
- Being from a Melanesian, Polynesian, Chinese, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern or Indian background
- Having gestational diabetes during pregnancy
- Being a woman with polycystic ovary syndrome (a complex hormonal condition)

People who have pre-diabetes can delay, and in some cases, prevent the development of type 2 diabetes by following a healthy lifestyle. This includes regular physical activity, making healthy food choices and being a healthy weight.
Reduce your risk of type 2 and gestational diabetes

Pre-diabetes is managed by making healthy lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, gestational diabetes and heart disease. This includes:

• **Being a healthy weight** – if you are currently overweight losing as little as 5-10% of your weight can help lower blood glucose levels and reduce your risk of developing diabetes.

• **Regular physical activity** – being active can help you manage your weight and maintain healthy blood glucose levels. It can also help manage other risk factors, such as blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Aim to do at least 30 minutes of ‘moderate intensity’ physical activity (such as brisk walking or swimming) every day. Try to include some resistance training (such as body weight exercises or light weights) twice a week to improve the way your muscles work.
• **Healthy eating** – choose a wide variety of foods including fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, lean meats and low fat dairy foods. Include high-fibre, low glycaemic index (GI)* carbohydrate foods. To best manage your weight, it’s important to ensure your total energy (kilojoule) intake is suitable for your age, gender and level of physical activity. Limiting saturated fat can also help the way your body’s insulin works and keeps blood fats in the target range.

A dietitian can help with the best food choices for weight management and for reducing your risk of developing type 2 diabetes. – see the ‘What should I eat section’

• **Blood pressure and blood fats** (cholesterol and triglycerides) – it’s important to keep these markers of health in the healthy target ranges as recommended by your doctor. Blood pressure and blood fats should be checked on a regular basis.

• **Smoking** – can also increase your risk of developing type 2 diabetes and heart disease. If you smoke it’s highly recommended to consider quitting. Some people find this difficult, so if you feel you can’t give up smoking on your own, ask for help – talk to your doctor or call the Quitline on 137 848. If you have pre-diabetes, it’s important to have an annual health check, including screening for type 2 diabetes. By adopting healthy lifestyle changes, type 2 diabetes can often be prevented or delayed.

* The glycaemic index or GI ranks carbohydrates according to their effect on blood glucose levels.
4 What should I eat?

To help prevent type 2 diabetes and other chronic conditions it is recommended to follow eating patterns based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Guideline 1
Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight through being physically active and choosing nutritious food and drink to meet your energy needs.

Guideline 2
Enjoying a wide variety of nutritious food from the five core food groups:

- Vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans
- Fruit
- Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa and barley
- Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives, mostly reduced fat

Guideline 3
Limiting food containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol.

- Foods often high in saturated fat include many biscuits, cakes, pastries, pies, processed meats, commercial burgers, pizza, fried foods, potato chips, crisps and other savoury snacks.
• Foods high in saturated fat such as butter, cream, cooking margarines, coconut and palm oil should be replaced with healthier alternatives containing mainly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats such as oils, spreads, nut butters/pastes and avocado.
• In order to limit salt, read food labels to choose lower salt options and do not add salt to foods in cooking or at the table.
• Foods and drinks that contain added sugars include confectionery, sugar-sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, energy and sports drinks.
• If you choose to drink alcohol, limit your intake. For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

**Guideline 4**
Encourage, support and promote breastfeeding.

**Guideline 5**
Care for your food; prepare and store it safely.
Signs and symptoms of diabetes

If you have diabetes you may experience a range of signs and symptoms. These will present differently depending on whether you have type 1 or type 2 diabetes.

Type 1 diabetes

Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition that is often diagnosed in childhood, although you can develop it at any age.

The signs and symptoms of type 1 diabetes can develop suddenly over a few days or weeks. They can be severe and, if left untreated, life-threatening. Being diagnosed and treated quickly is critical.

Signs and symptoms of type 1 diabetes may include:

- Passing urine more frequently
- Excessive thirst and drinking a lot of fluids
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Mood changes
- Skin infections or itching
- Oral or vaginal thrush
- Abdominal pain
- Excessive hunger
- Weakness
- Headaches
- Blurred vision

If you or a member of your family are experiencing one or more of these symptoms you should make an urgent appointment to see your doctor.
Type 2 diabetes
Type 2 diabetes is a progressive condition that tends to develop gradually. As a result, the signs and symptoms may develop very slowly. You may not notice the signs or symptoms at all, or you may dismiss them as a normal part of getting older.

This can mean that by the time you notice something, you may have been living with diabetes for some years, and you could be at risk of developing complications. In some cases, those complications may be the first sign that you have diabetes.

- Passing urine more frequently, commonly noticed at night
- Dry mouth
- Being more thirsty than usual
- Feeling tired, lethargic or irritable
- Constantly feeling hungry despite having eaten
- Having cuts, sores or ulcers that heal slowly
- Itching, skin infections
- Thrush or bladder infections
- Blurred vision
- Weight changes – commonly a gradual increase in weight
- Mood swings
- Headaches
- Feeling dizzy
- Pain or tingling in the lower legs and/or feet

If you notice one or more of these signs or symptoms, you should make an appointment to see your doctor immediately.

Early detection and treatment of diabetes can prevent the development of serious, and in some cases life-threatening, health problems.