

Complications of Diabetes Backgrounder

Diabetes is a serious condition that is estimated to have affected 2.7 million people in 2010 (7.6 per cent of the Canadian population).¹ If left untreated or improperly managed, it can result in a number of serious complications.² These complications can include, but are not limited to:

1. Diabetes death

Complications of diabetes can put patients at an increased risk of premature death. Up to 80 per cent of people with diabetes will die as a result of a heart attack or stroke.³ A patient suffering from type 2 diabetes may have a shortened life expectancy by five to 10 years.⁴

2. Eye disease (blindness)

The effect diabetes has on the retina is the main threat to a diabetes patient's vision.³ About one in four people with diabetes have some nonproliferative retinopathy, a change in the tiny blood vessels that feed the retina.⁵ People with diabetes are also more likely to develop cataracts earlier in life and are twice as likely to develop glaucoma.³ If your blood sugar levels are too high or are not maintained, you may experience blurred vision, difficulty in your eyes focusing, and you may even experience a change in your eyeglass prescription.⁵

3. Heart disease & stroke

Heart disease, or cardiovascular disease (CVD), is a high risk factor for people living with diabetes.³ If your blood sugar levels are poorly managed, diabetes patients run the risk of high blood pressure, atherosclerosis (narrowing of the arteries), coronary artery disease and stroke.⁶

4. Kidney disease

Long-term diabetes patients are at risk of developing kidney disease, a serious complication that causes damage to blood vessels and nerves, as well as an increased risk of infection.⁷ As many as 50 per cent or more of people with diabetes show signs of early kidney damage, and if left untreated, it can result in more kidney damage or even kidney failure.⁷

5. Amputation

Nerve damage, or Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy (DPN), is another long-term diabetes complication that occurs when there is prolonged exposure to high blood sugar levels.³ This causes damage to the nerves in the arms, hands, legs and feet, and often leads to limb amputation.^{3,4} Diabetes complications results in seven out of ten non-traumatic limb amputations.⁴

6. Erectile dysfunction

Diabetes, among other diseases, accounts for the majority of erectile dysfunction cases.⁸ This is a result of damage to nerves, arteries, smooth muscles and fibrous tissues.⁸ While sexual problems may be common among diabetes patients, they are a difficult subject to raise and discuss.

Good diabetes care and management can prevent or delay the onset of these complications, and others.² By adjusting your food plan, activity and medications, including insulin intake levels, for instance, you and your healthcare team can work to keep your blood sugar levels within your target range to maintain your overall health.²

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