

[▶ Return to Web version](#)

## Diabetes and Exercise

### How can exercise help my diabetes?

Exercise can help control your weight and lower your blood sugar level. It also lowers your risk of heart disease, a condition which is common in people who have diabetes. Exercise can also help you feel better about yourself and increase your overall health.

### What kind of exercise should I do?

Talk to your doctor about what kind of exercise is right for you. The type of exercise you can do will depend on whether you have any other health problems. Most doctors recommend aerobic exercise, which makes you breathe more deeply and makes your heart work harder. Examples of aerobic exercise include walking, jogging, aerobic dance or bicycling. If you have problems with the nerves in your feet or legs, your doctor may want you to do a type of exercise that won't put stress on your feet. These exercises include swimming, bicycling, rowing or chair exercises.

No matter what kind of exercise you do, you should warm up before you start and cool down when you're done. To warm up, spend 5 to 10 minutes doing a low-intensity exercise such as walking. Then gently stretch for another 5 to 10 minutes. Repeat these steps after exercising to cool down.

When you start an exercise program, go slowly. Then gradually increase the intensity and length of your sessions as you become more fit. Talk to your doctor for specific advice.

### Are there any risks to exercising for people with diabetes?

Yes, although the benefits far outweigh the risks. Exercise changes the way your body reacts to insulin. Regular exercise makes your body more sensitive to insulin, and your blood sugar level may get too low (called hypoglycemia) after exercising. You may need to check your blood sugar level before and after exercising. Your doctor can tell you what your blood sugar level should be before and after exercise.

If your blood sugar level is too low or too high right before you plan to exercise, it's better to wait until the level improves. It is especially important to watch your blood sugar level if you exercise in really hot or cold conditions, because the temperature changes how your body absorbs insulin.

### How will I know if my blood sugar is too low while I'm exercising?

Hypoglycemia usually occurs gradually, so you need to pay attention to how you're feeling during exercise. You may feel a change in your heartbeat, suddenly sweat more, feel shaky or anxious,

or feel hungry. When you feel this way, you should stop exercising and follow your doctor's advice about how to treat hypoglycemia. Your doctor may suggest you keep candy or juice on hand to treat hypoglycemia.

## **What else should I do to exercise properly?**

Many people with diabetes have problems with the nerves in their feet and legs, sometimes without even knowing it. So it's important that you wear shoes that fit well and have plenty of room when you exercise. Otherwise you could develop blisters or other sores on your feet that can lead to infection and other problems. You should check your feet before and after you exercise to make sure there are no blisters or other sores.

## **Should I drink more fluids during exercise?**

Yes. When you're exercising, your body uses more fluid to keep you cool. By the time you feel thirsty, you may already be getting dehydrated. Dehydration (not enough fluid in your body) can affect your blood sugar level. Drink plenty of fluid before, during and after exercise.

## **Exercise checklist for people with diabetes**

- Talk to your doctor about the right exercise for you.
- Check your blood sugar level before and after exercising.
- Check your feet for blisters or sores before and after exercising.
- Wear the proper shoes and socks.
- Drink plenty of fluid before, during and after exercising.
- Warm up before exercising and cool down afterward.
- Have a snack handy in case your blood sugar level drops too low.

## **Other Organizations**

American Diabetes Association

<http://www.diabetes.org>

800-342-2383

*This handout was developed by the American Academy of Family Physicians in cooperation with the American Diabetes Association.*

Reviewed/Updated: 7/02  
Created: 3/99

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

[Copyright](#) © 1999-2002 American Academy of Family Physicians

Permission is granted to print and photocopy this material for nonprofit educational uses.

Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.

[Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About This Site](#) | [What's New](#)