

Type 2 Diabetes, Heart and Metabolic Risks, and Psychiatric Medications

For people with a psychiatric illness, like depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, the first step is to get treatment. Treatment can help individuals feel better and return to everyday life. However, doctors have found that some medicines for people with psychiatric illness can make them more likely to become overweight or obese and more likely to have an increase in blood glucose (sugar) and lipids (like cholesterol and triglycerides). Such weight increases in glucose and lipids may increase risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease (e.g. heart attack and stroke). It is important for individuals to learn how to take care of their physical health while taking the antipsychotic medications that are helping to treat the psychiatric illness.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is not a single disease, but a family of diseases. The two most common forms are known as **Type 1 diabetes** and **Type 2 diabetes**.

Type 1 diabetes is usually diagnosed in children and young adults, and was previously known as juvenile diabetes. In type 1 diabetes, the body does not produce insulin. Insulin is a hormone that is needed to convert sugar, starches and other food into energy needed for daily life. Only 5-10% of people with diabetes have this form of the disease. With the help of insulin therapy and other treatments, even young children with type 1 diabetes can learn to manage their condition and live long, healthy, happy lives.

Type 2 diabetes is the most common form of diabetes. Millions of Americans have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, and many more are unaware they are at high risk. Some groups have a higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes than others. Type 2 diabetes is more common in African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, as well as the aged population.

In type 2 diabetes, either the body does not produce enough insulin or the cells ignore the insulin. Insulin is necessary for the body to be able to use glucose for energy. When you eat food, the body breaks down all of the sugars and starches into glucose, which is the basic fuel for the cells in the body. Insulin takes the sugar from the blood into the cells. When glucose builds up in the blood instead of going into cells, it can lead to diabetes complications.

Will the medicine I'm taking cause diabetes?

Medications for psychiatric illnesses do not cause type 1 diabetes, but some medications do increase the chance that you will develop type 2 diabetes, or develop risk factors for diabetes and cardiovascular disease, such as insulin resistance or high blood pressure.

This doesn't mean that everyone who takes these medicines will develop type 2 diabetes or increased risks. Instead, it means that you are more likely to get these health problems than if you weren't taking the medicine. Medication for psychiatric illness is only one of the things that increase the risk of diabetes or cardiovascular disease. Not getting enough exercise and eating too much can also increase risk. You can lower your risk by being more active or exercising and watching your weight. You can also lower risk by talking to your doctor about taking medications with lower risk for these problems.

Will the medicine I'm taking make me gain weight?

Many people who take medicines for psychiatric illness gain some weight. For some people, the weight gain isn't much, other people may not gain any weight while some people may gain a lot of weight. It will be important for you and your doctor to keep track of your weight and any changes in your weight after you start taking a new medication. You may need to change some things you eat, eat less, or get more activity and exercise to keep your weight where you want it. Some people who gain too much weight may be advised by their doctor to change medications. You should never change or stop your medication without talking to your doctor.

What can I do so I don't get diabetes because of the medicine I'm taking?

Some of the most important ways to help prevent weight gain, obesity, diabetes, or other metabolic changes (such as insulin resistance and abnormal blood lipids) are:

- Exercise more frequently or for a longer period of time. Discuss with your doctor what exercise would be best for you.
- You should change your activity or exercise routine slowly (for example, adding 5 minutes to your workout time each week). It is important to give your body time to adjust to the new routine. Your doctor can help you choose enjoyable exercises that are right for your age, weight, and overall health. Even some activities like gardening or doing housework can help increase your overall level of fitness.
- Exercise regularly—if walking is your only exercise, try to do it every day, or at least every other day. Try to find a place and time that makes it easy for you to exercise regularly. If you don't have to travel far or make a lot of preparations before you exercise, you'll find it's easier to stick to a schedule.
- Watch what you eat—try to cut down on fatty snacks and desserts (like chips, ice cream, and cake) and sugary foods and drinks (like regular soda), or at least eat less of them. Try to make your food and drink portions smaller. It may take some time for your body to get used to smaller meals, but it's worth it.

In addition to these steps, your doctor may decide to try a different medicine if you gain a lot of weight on the medicine you are taking now. *You should never make any changes to your medication on your own – any changes in the kind or dose of the medication you are taking should only be done under the direct supervision of your doctor.*

Is there any way to tell if I'm going to develop diabetes or risk factors for heart disease?

It's impossible to tell exactly which people will get changes in their body leading to diabetes and other problems and which people won't. But most people who get diabetes will first go through a period when they have something called "prediabetes." For people with prediabetes, the amount of glucose in their blood is higher than normal, but not high enough that they have diabetes. Prediabetes is a kind of "warning sign" that tells you your risk of getting diabetes is high. However, by changing your diet and getting more exercise, you can help reduce your diabetes risk. The best way to make your risk of developing diabetes or other cardiovascular risks (like increased blood cholesterol and blood pressure) smaller is to keep your weight under control and exercise more.

How will I know if I have diabetes?

Because you are taking a medicine for psychiatric illness, your doctor should check your blood glucose (sugar) level every few months (especially when you first start taking the medicine). This test is the only way to know if you have diabetes. Your doctor should also tell you if you have prediabetes (see above), and if you need to change some things in your life to make your chance of getting diabetes and other health problems smaller. Your doctor should also check some of the other things that affect your health and your risk for diabetes, like your weight and waist size, your blood pressure, and the amount of cholesterol and triglycerides (two kinds of fat) in your blood.

If these tests show that you have or are likely to develop diabetes, or to develop other health problems, your doctor may decide to try a different psychiatric medicine, or help you make changes in your life to reduce your risk.

More information about medicines for psychiatric illness and diabetes can be obtained from the American Diabetes Association, at 1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383) or online at www.diabetes.org.