SYMPTOM

Diabetes warning signs

A group of changes, such as unusual thirst and frequent urination, that can happen when blood sugar is high.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Very thirsty, tired, hungry, or needing to urinate often

WHERE IT IS FELT
Whole body, eyes, bladder, skin, hands, or feet

MOST COMMON CAUSES
High blood sugar, dehydration, water-pill medicines

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New thirst and frequent urination with rapid weight loss

USUALLY LASTS
Persists while blood sugar stays high

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Symptoms last several days, recur, or disrupt sleep

Overview

Diabetes warning signs are changes that can occur when the amount of glucose, or sugar, in your blood is too high. They often include unusual thirst, frequent urination, tiredness, blurred vision, or weight loss without trying.

These symptoms do not always mean you have diabetes. Dehydration, medicines, infections, kidney problems, and other conditions can cause similar changes. A blood test is needed to find the cause.

Type 1 diabetes symptoms may develop over days or weeks. Type 2 diabetes symptoms often develop gradually and may be easy to overlook. Prediabetes, which means blood sugar is above the usual range but not in the diabetes range, generally causes no symptoms. Diabetes during pregnancy also may not cause noticeable warning signs.

What it may feel or look like

High blood sugar draws water from body tissues and causes the kidneys to make more urine. This can produce several connected symptoms:

A child may begin wetting the bed after previously staying dry at night. Younger children may become unusually tired, thirsty, or irritable. They may not be able to describe what feels wrong.

No single warning sign confirms diabetes. Some people have few or no symptoms, especially early in type 2 diabetes.

- Feeling unusually thirsty or having a dry mouth
- Urinating more often, including during the night
- Feeling very hungry despite eating normally
- Losing weight without trying
- Feeling tired, weak, or irritable
- Having blurred or changing vision
- Developing slow-healing cuts or repeated skin, genital, or urinary infections
- Having tingling or reduced feeling in the hands or feet

Common causes

Common explanations

Diabetes is one possible cause of persistent thirst and frequent urination. In diabetes, the body either does not make enough insulin or cannot use it effectively. Insulin is the hormone that helps glucose move from the blood into cells for energy.

Dehydration can cause thirst, dry mouth, tiredness, and dizziness. Hot weather, fever, vomiting, diarrhea, heavy exercise, or not drinking enough may contribute.

Water-pill medicines, also called diuretics, increase urination. Caffeine and alcohol can have a similar effect. Urinary tract infections may cause frequent or urgent urination, usually with discomfort or passing only small amounts.

Less common explanations

Kidney conditions and certain hormone disorders can affect thirst, urination, or blood glucose. Some medicines, including corticosteroids like prednisone or hydrocortisone , can raise blood sugar. Pregnancy can also change how the body handles glucose.

A clinician can consider these possibilities based on your symptoms, health history, medicines, and test results.

Urgent explanations

Very high blood sugar can sometimes lead to diabetic ketoacidosis, often called DKA. This

happens when the body lacks enough insulin and begins producing acidic chemicals called ketones. It is more common in type 1 diabetes but can occur in other forms.

Another serious complication, called hyperosmolar hyperglycemic state, involves severe dehydration and very high blood sugar. It is more often associated with type 2 diabetes.

Both conditions require emergency treatment.

When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine appointment if thirst, increased urination, blurred vision, tiredness, or repeated infections last several days, keep returning, or affect sleep and daily activities. Testing is also reasonable if you have risk factors for diabetes, even without symptoms.

Seek same-day medical care for new excessive thirst and urination accompanied by rapid weight loss, marked weakness, or worsening symptoms. A child or teenager with this combination should be assessed the same day. Contact your pregnancy care team promptly if these symptoms develop during pregnancy.

Go to an emergency department or call emergency services if symptoms include:

Do not wait for a routine appointment when these emergency signs are present.

- Vomiting or an inability to keep fluids down
- Belly pain with deep or rapid breathing
- Fruity-smelling breath
- Severe dehydration, confusion, or unusual drowsiness
- A seizure, collapse, or difficulty waking

How the cause is found

A clinician will ask when the symptoms began, how much you are drinking and urinating, whether your weight has changed, and which medicines you take. They may also ask about pregnancy, recent illness, and family history.

Blood tests can measure glucose at that moment, after fasting, or after a glucose drink. An A1C test estimates your average blood glucose over roughly the previous two to three months. If you do not have clear symptoms, an abnormal result may need confirmation with another test.

Urine or blood ketone tests may be used when DKA is a concern. Ketones alone do not

diagnose diabetes. Additional blood tests, including antibody or insulin-production tests, may sometimes help identify the type of diabetes.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Diabetes care may involve food and activity changes, glucose monitoring, tablets or other medicines, or insulin. Type 1 diabetes requires insulin. Your treatment plan should be based on your test results and individual needs.

While waiting for a non-urgent appointment, drink water regularly and note when symptoms occur. Record any changes in weight, vision, urination, or infections. Bring an up-to-date medicine list to the appointment.

Do not use another person's insulin or diabetes medicine. Avoid extreme diets intended to lower blood sugar quickly. If you already have diabetes and become unwell, follow your personal sick-day plan and seek advice if your glucose or ketone readings are outside the limits your care team provided.

Self-care should not delay urgent assessment when rapid weight loss, vomiting, deep breathing, confusion, or severe drowsiness occurs.

What to expect

If high blood sugar is causing the symptoms, thirst and frequent urination often improve as glucose returns toward your target range. Vision may take longer to settle because changing glucose levels can temporarily affect the eye's lens.

If tests do not show diabetes, further assessment may look for dehydration, medicine effects, infection, or kidney and hormone conditions.

Ongoing follow-up depends on the results. Someone diagnosed with diabetes will usually need regular monitoring and support. A single normal result may not explain continuing symptoms, so return for follow-up if they persist or worsen.

Common questions

Can diabetes start without warning signs?

Yes. Type 2 diabetes and diabetes during pregnancy may cause no noticeable symptoms. Screening can find high blood sugar before symptoms appear.

Does eating sugar cause these symptoms immediately?

A sugary meal can raise blood glucose temporarily, but persistent warning signs are not usually explained by one meal. Diabetes develops through a combination of factors and is not diagnosed from what you recently ate.

Can blurred vision mean diabetes?

High blood sugar can temporarily change how the eye focuses, but blurred vision has many possible causes. Sudden vision loss, a dark curtain over the vision, or severe eye pain requires urgent assessment.

Can I check at home?

A home glucose meter can provide useful information, but it cannot always confirm or rule out diabetes. Technique, timing, and the meter itself can affect the reading. Contact a clinician about symptoms or unexpected results rather than relying on one home measurement.

Sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Signs and Symptoms of Diabetes
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Symptoms and Causes of Diabetes
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Diabetes Tests and Diagnosis
- NHS: Diabetic ketoacidosis
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence: Type 1 Diabetes in Adults-Diagnosis and Management