

# The diabetes time bomb

## —could you be at risk?

As the nation's weight increases, the number of us developing type 2 diabetes is growing too, so make sure you know the warning signs...



**Nicola Moxey, 50, from Bentley, Suffolk**

If you've noticed your waistband getting ever tighter, you could have more to worry about than just shopping for a new wardrobe. Type 2 diabetes now affects 2.5 million people in the UK, and if your waist measures 31.5in (80cm) – a Marks & Spencer size 14 – you're already in the 'at risk' category. It's estimated that there are a further 850,000 suspected cases – people who don't know they have it because, like our expanding girth, the tell-tale signs, such as blurred vision and increased tiredness, tend to come on slowly, says Libby Dowling, Clinical Advisor at Diabetes UK. 'They also tend to be the kind of things that we put down to ageing.'

### WHAT ARE YOUR CHANCES?

- Are you white and over 40, or black or Asian and over 25?
- Do you have a family history of type 2 diabetes?
- Do you have high blood pressure?
- Does your waist measure more than 31.5in?

The more questions you answer yes to, the higher your risk, and this risk increases with age and waist size. You can't change your genes or age, but you can lose weight, and work at lowering your blood pressure. For example, a woman of 45 with a family history of diabetes has a one in ten risk of developing the condition in the next ten years, if her blood pressure is high and she has a waist measurement over 31in. But her risk drops to one in 20 when she reduces her waistline and blood pressure. For a

personalised risk assessment, visit [www.diabetes.org.uk/riskscore](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/riskscore).

### KNOW THE SIGNS

#### The top-three risk factors for type 2 diabetes are:

**FAMILY HISTORY:** The closer the relative, the greater your risk. If one parent has it, there's a 15 per cent chance you will too. If they both have it, your risk is 75 per cent.

**A LARGE WAIST SIZE:** This is now considered a more accurate measure of body fat than your weight/height ratio (BMI), and scientists have picked out 31.5in as the red flag for women (whatever their height).

**AGE:** Your risk goes up over the age of 40 if you're Caucasian, or over 25 if you're black or Asian.

You're also at increased risk if you have polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) combined with weight gain, or if you suffered diabetes in pregnancy, or had a very large baby (10lb).

### WARNING SIGNS

#### The main symptoms to look out for are:

- 1 Needing to pass urine more frequently
- 2 Feeling constantly thirsty
- 3 Suffering with frequent fungal infections, such as thrush
- 4 Slower healing of wounds and cuts
- 5 Blurry or deteriorating vision
- 6 Increased tiredness

If you answer yes to either 1 or 2, plus any of the other symptoms, you should ask your GP for a diabetes test.

## WHAT IS TYPE 2 DIABETES?

Although quite a different condition from type 1 diabetes (diagnosed when the body's insulin-producing cells are completely destroyed, preventing glucose from food being converted into energy), type 2 must be taken seriously. 'The body is still producing some insulin, but either there isn't enough to control glucose, or the body is unable to use the insulin it is producing (insulin resistance). Abdominal fat is known to stop the insulin from working properly – the reason waist measurement matters so much.

'The sugar that can't be used for energy builds up in the blood – causing the types of symptoms listed on the left – but 50 per cent of people diagnosed already have

some complications, such as high blood pressure or deteriorating vision,' says Libby Dowling. 'It's a progressive condition, which cannot be reversed, and the complications can be very nasty – strokes, heart disease, blindness, and even amputation – all caused by damage due to poorly controlled blood-sugar levels.'

## GETTING DIAGNOSED

If you're concerned about your risk or possible symptoms, see your GP. 'Diagnosis is made by having your blood-sugar levels measured after a period of fasting for eight hours and, ideally, again after something is eaten,' says Libby Dowling. 'A normal fasting blood-sugar reading would be under 6mmol/l. Impaired fasting glucose is diagnosed at 6.1-6.9mmol/l and is a sign of pre-diabetes, while a reading of 7mmol/l or above indicates diabetes.'

## WILL YOU NEED MEDICATION?

'The first-line treatment for most people is nothing more gruelling than the healthy lifestyle that we're all urged to follow (and which would probably prevent many of us from developing the condition in the first place): brisk exercise (such as fast walking, gardening or housework) for 30 minutes, five times a week, and a sensible diet that's low in fat, sugar and salt – with at least five portions of fruit and vegetables daily.

'If your blood-sugar levels aren't changing, despite your efforts, or they're very high at the time of diagnosis, medication can help. It can stimulate more insulin production, and slow the absorption of starchy food to keep blood-sugar levels stable, or improve insulin resistance by helping the body to use the insulin that is already being produced.'



**Jane Couchman,  
34, from  
Horley,  
Surrey**



**Diane Platt,  
44, from  
Bournemouth**





## 'I found out by chance'

**Nicola Moxey, 50**

'Six years ago, I went through a phase of having one urine infection after the other. During one of these, I was sitting in the doctor's waiting room and the nurse popped out and asked, "Does anyone want to help me test some new blood-sugar strips?" I volunteered. Seconds later, she had the result – I had full-blown type 2 diabetes.

'I was 44, and knew I was overweight. I'd never managed to shift the baby weight I'd gained ten years earlier. But I hadn't taken on board how seriously it could affect my health. I now weighed 105kg – over 16st – which on my 5ft 7in frame gave me a BMI of 33. I got a referral to an endocrinologist who gave me blood-sugar strips to test my glucose levels at home, and I looked into ways of losing weight. My dad said, "Try a low-carb diet – it worked when you were ten!"

'I had a vague recollection of being put on a special diet as a child because of high blood sugar, but I didn't know the details. I looked up the link between carbohydrates and blood sugar, and cut out all bread, pasta and potatoes. Using the strips, I could see that if I got hungry, my blood sugar went sky high – so I now know to keep hunger at bay with a high-protein snack, such as a slither of cheese or lean roast beef.

'Within six months of starting my new regime, my blood sugar was at a normal level, and I'd lost 20kg, getting down to a healthy BMI. Sticking to my diet – eggs for breakfast, homemade soup for lunch and meat and veg for dinner – I've maintained that weight ever since, and this has kept my diabetes under control. I feel empowered knowing I'm doing something positive for my health – I would have hated to have been stuck on medication for the rest of my life.'



## 'I wasn't even overweight'

**Jane Couchman, 34**

'My dad Alan had to watch what he ate and drank because he had diabetes. I used to play around with his sugar-testing strips. Both his parents had type 2 diabetes, and so did five of his six siblings.

'I was running my own travel and health PR and marketing company, Scarlett PR and Marketing, when, at a trade show, I saw the Diabetes UK stand, flagging up the warning signs and the risk factors. I realised that my tiredness may not just be due to my busy job. I was nearly always thirsty, and I was getting up at night to use the loo. My waist measured about 31.5in, but I wasn't overweight. When Dad told me he was 32 when he was diagnosed, I decided to ask my doctor for a test.

'He found my blood-glucose level was so high at 15mmol/l, that I was prescribed the drug Metformin (to improve my insulin production), which had to be taken at regular intervals, with meals, so that meant eating regularly. In a job that involves a lot of foreign travel, I have to know what time it would be at home, and eat when my body expects me to. I have to stick to low-fat, low-GI food, which just makes me crave cakes and pasta!

'Three times a week, I have to check my blood three times a day. I still haven't got used to the bruised fingers. Since being diagnosed and starting this regime, I've lost half a stone, my waist is now down to 29in – and I know that if I keep up the good work, I'll prevent my condition from getting worse.'



## 'I'm lucky I can still beat it'

**Diane Platt, 44**

'Last May, I had a skiing accident and ended up in a French hospital with a broken pelvis. The doctors there were concerned about my blood-sugar results, and kept asking if I had diabetes. When I got home, I was diagnosed with pre-diabetes – in other words, type 2 diabetes was imminent if I didn't do anything about it.

'Four years earlier, I'd been diagnosed with Pernicious anaemia (a form of vitamin B12 deficiency), which causes many of the same symptoms as type 2 diabetes, and I was now being treated with B12 injections every three months. I'd assumed this was the cause of my tiredness and thirst, and the strange taste in my mouth. My paternal grandmother had been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in her early 50s. Then my father discovered he was

diabetic at 70 – raising my risk even further.

'It seemed incredibly lucky that I'd been warned before the condition became irreversible – by losing weight,

I still had a hope of heading it off. I realised 80 per cent of what I ate was carbohydrate – toast for breakfast, sandwiches for lunch, pasta for dinner. I signed up for the Go Lower programme and had food posted to me in vacuum-packed sachets. The 16-week programme cost £850, but long after completing the course, I followed its low-carb recipes and continued to lose weight. The support of the Go Lower nutritionist continued after I'd finished paying, too. I've shaken off 4st, and, hopefully, reversed the fate of diabetes that was awaiting me.'

“Since being diagnosed, I've lost half a stone. If I keep up the good work, I'll prevent my condition from getting any worse”