



NSIPM & Sano Wellness Center

Long-Term Complications of Diabetes*

All long-term complications of diabetes can be prevented with proper blood sugar control.

Tissue or Organ Affected	What Happens	Complication
Blood Vessels	Atherosclerotic plaque builds up and blocks large or medium sized arteries in the heart, brain, legs, and penis. The walls of small blood vessels are damaged so that the vessels do not transfer oxygen normally and may leak.	Poor circulation causes wounds to heal poorly and can lead to heart disease, stroke, gangrene of the feet and hands, impotence, and infections. Poor circulation to the brain can affect mood and eventually contribute to dementias.
Eyes	The small blood vessels of the retina become damaged.	Decreased vision, blurred vision, and ultimately, blindness.
Kidney	Blood vessels in the kidney thicken; protein leaks into the urine; the blood isn't filtered normally.	Poor kidney function; kidney failure (At least half of all dialysis patients are diabetics).
Nerves	Nerves are damaged because glucose isn't metabolized normally and because the blood supply is inadequate.	Sudden or gradual weakness in the legs; reduced sensations, tingling, and pain in the hands and feet; chronic damage to nerves. *
Autonomic Nervous System	The nerves that control blood pressure and digestive processes become damaged.	Swings in blood pressure; swallowing difficulties and altered gastrointestinal function, with bouts of diarrhea.
Skin	Poor blood flow to the skin and loss of feeling result in repeated injury.	Sores, deep infection (diabetic ulcers); poor healing.
Blood	White blood cell function is impaired.	Increased susceptibility to infection, especially of the urinary tract and skin.
Connective Tissue	Glucose isn't metabolized normally, causing tissue to thicken or contract.	Carpal tunnel syndrome; Dupuytren's contracture.

Feet and legs of diabetic patients should be visually inspected regularly. Because of loss of sensation to feet especially, sores or gangrene may develop without the patient's awareness.

*Berkow, R., MD, ed. Merck Manual of Medical Information, Home Edition, p. 719. Merck Research Laboratories, 1997

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