

Diabetes and the Health Care Team

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Diabetes is a disease that affects many parts of the body, such as the eyes, kidneys, blood vessels, heart, legs, and feet. As a result, a team approach to taking care of the disease can be helpful. When a team of individuals works together problems are identified earlier, and it is easier to reduce or prevent diabetes complications.

You, family members, and your doctor may be the initial members of your team. Other team members may include a registered dietitian, certified diabetes care and education specialist (CDCES), diabetes nurse, pharmacist, dentist, eye doctor, foot doctor, social worker, and a mental health counselor.

You are the most important member on the team. You are the person living with diabetes, and you know how you feel and what you are experiencing. Your responsibility is to communicate the feelings and problems you are experiencing to your doctor and other members of your team.

Family members and friends may assist in the challenges of the day-to-day management of diabetes such as monitoring blood glucose, planning meals, taking medications, and being physically active.

Family members and close friends can provide support and relieve some of the burden. To help your family and friends provide the best support, you can help them understand the disease.

The following sections explain some potential members of your healthcare team and some helpful questions to consider asking them. Table 1 gives a description of common measurements recorded by these healthcare professionals. It also includes how often they are usually taken and some pointers for you that are related to the measures. At the end of this article, Table 2 is available for your reference of your team members.

Primary Care Provider

Your primary care provider is the person you visit for general check-ups and when you are sick. Your primary care provider coordinates your care and sends you to a specialist if you have eye, kidney, heart, foot or nerve problems. An endocrinologist is a primary care provider who specializes in treating diabetes. This specialist can help you manage your diabetes.

Questions to Ask Your Primary Care Provider

- What target range should I have for my blood glucose?
- How is my blood pressure?
- How is my blood cholesterol?
- Do I have symptoms of nerve damage?
- Are my feet healthy?
- Do I have signs of kidney disease?
- Should I get a flu or pneumonia vaccine?
- When next should I see you?

Registered Dietitian

A registered dietitian (RD) is the nutrition specialist; some RDs have specific training in working with people with diabetes. Your primary care provider can refer you to a dietitian. The RD will help you design a meal plan that fits your needs. Your food choices help determine whether your blood glucose is kept within the target range. An RD can give you tips on managing your blood glucose with food, reading food labels and incorporating physical activity into your lifestyle.

Questions to ask your RD

- How do I make good food choices?
- What foods cause my blood glucose to rise quickly?
- Are there foods I can eat a lot of?
- What foods should I choose when I am eating out?
- How do I find recipes for people with diabetes?
- How can I cook for my family if they don't have diabetes?
- How do I include cultural foods into my meal plan?
- How can I afford to follow a diabetic diet?
- How do I eat when I am sick?
- What is the best diet to follow manage my weight?
- Can I drink alcohol?

Certified Diabetes Care and Education Specialist (CDCES)

A certified diabetes care and education specialist (CDCES) has special training in teaching people with diabetes how to manage the disease. Many times, this is a nurse, but not always. Many RDs are CDCESs, too. CDCESs provide information on diabetes and how it affects the body, how to deal with high and low blood glucose levels and how to adjust insulin when you are sick or taking part in physical activity. They also teach you about giving insulin injections and using a glucose meter.

Questions to ask your CDCES

- What is type 2 diabetes and what are the symptoms?
- How do I manage my diabetes?
- How does diabetes affect my eyes, kidneys, heart, and nerves?
- How do I use a glucose meter to check my blood glucose?
- What should I do if my blood glucose numbers are too low or too high?
- How do I give myself insulin injections?
- How do I cope with diabetes?

Pharmacist

Pharmacists provide information and counseling on medicines and can help with the selection of blood glucose meters and over-the-counter diabetes supplies. Pharmacists can recognize signs of diabetes complication and make referrals to other professionals on your health care team.

It is best to fill your prescriptions at the same pharmacy so that your records are all in one place. Let the pharmacist know all the medicines you are taking, including herbal supplements, because they can interact with your diabetes medicine. It is important to talk to the pharmacist about problems you are having with your diabetes medicines (or any medicines you take) each time you fill a prescription.

Questions to Ask Your Pharmacist

- How should I take the medicine?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- How will I know if the medicine is working?
- What are some of the side effects of taking this medicine?
- What should I avoid when taking this medicine?
- How should I store the medicine?
- Do I need a refill?

Ophthalmologist

An ophthalmologist is a doctor who specializes in diseases of the eye. Too much glucose in the blood and high blood pressure can damage the tiny blood vessels in the eyes. This is called diabetic retinopathy.

Questions to Ask Your Ophthalmologist

- Do I have eye problems?
- Do I need to start wearing glasses or do I need new glasses?
- Do I need special treatment?
- What can I do to take care of my eyes?
- What should I do if I notice changes in my vision?
- Can I drive?

Podiatrist

A podiatrist is a doctor trained to prevent, diagnose, and treat problems of the lower legs. People with diabetes can develop nerve damage and lose feeling in their legs and feet due to poor blood flow. This loss of feeling makes it difficult to feel pain, heat, or cold, so it is easy to get cuts and sores on your feet and not know it. If these go untreated, they can lead to serious infections and, in some cases, can lead to amputations.

Questions to Ask Your Podiatrist

- How well do the nerves in my feet sense feeling?
- How is the blood flow to my legs and feet?
- Are there changes in my feet?
- What is the best way to trim my toenails?
- What type of lotion or cream should I use on my legs and feet?
- What are the best types of shoes to wear?
- Can special shoes help my feet?
- How can I care for my feet?

Dentist

Dentists take care of your teeth, mouth, and gums. People with diabetes are more likely to have gum disease especially if their blood sugar is not well managed.

Questions to Ask Your Dentist

- Do I have signs of teeth, mouth, or gum problems?
- How should I protect my teeth?
- What is the correct way to brush and floss my teeth?
- What should I do to keep my teeth, mouth, and gums healthy?

Mental Health Professionals

People with diabetes are more likely to be depressed than people without diabetes. The daily tasks needed to manage diabetes can become overwhelming, especially if a person has complications such as nerve damage or kidney or eye problems.

Table 1. Tests to See How Well You Are Managing Your Diabetes and If You Are at Risk for Diabetes Complications.

Test	How often should I be tested?	Pointers
Blood pressure	Every visit	Identify changes in Blood pressure
Weight	Every visit	Identify changes in weight.
Foot check	Every visit	Remove your socks and shoes as a reminder for your doctor to check your feet.
Blood glucose monitoring	Every visit	Bring your diabetes record book.
A1C test	At least twice a year	More often if your A1C level is over 7 and for other reasons determined by your doctor.
Dental exam	Twice a year	Teeth cleaning and check-up. Problems to mention: sore, red, inflamed, bleeding gums; toothache, denture and other pain; infections; cold or canker sores.
Complete eye exam	Once a year	Dilated eye exam Problems to mention: dry itchy eyes; eye pain; blurred or poor vision. Ask about cataracts and glaucoma
Complete foot exam	Once a year	Check feeling and pulses in feet. Check blood flow to legs and feet. Problems to mention: dry skin; cuts or sores; corns, calluses, bunions, ingrown toenails; infections.
Blood lipid tests	Once a year	Cholesterol and triglyceride
Kidney function tests	Once a year	Urine and blood test to check for kidney function. (Kidney damage from diabetes happens slowly so you may not feel sick at all for many years.) Problems to mention: swelling in hands and feet.

Let your primary care provider know if you no longer find enjoyment in the things that once brought you pleasure, if you notice changes in sleep patterns and appetite, if you feel tired all the time, or have suicidal thoughts. Your primary care provider will work with you to identify the reasons for these symptoms and may suggest you see a mental health professional.

A mental health professional may be a social worker, counselor, or a psychiatrist. These members of your team help with the social and emotional side of living with diabetes.

The social worker may help you find resources to help with your medical and financial needs.

Questions to Ask Your Social Worker

- What kind of costs does Medicare cover?
- Is there somewhere I can get help with the costs of diabetes?

The psychologist or counselor helps with emotional and stress problems that relate to diabetes management.

Questions to Ask Your Psychologist or Counselor

- Is depression normal for persons with diabetes?
- How do I deal with my feelings and emotions?
- Can my emotions raise my blood glucose?
- Where can I find support for depression and stress?

The psychiatrist is a medical doctor who can prescribe medication to treat emotional problems and provide some counseling.

Questions to Ask Your Psychiatrist

- If I have to take medicine, what are the side effects?
- Are there other treatments?
- How will my medicine affect my blood glucose levels?

Table 2. My Healthcare Team.

Team member	Name and address	Phone number
Doctor		
Registered dietitian		
Certified diabetes care and education specialist		
Pharmacist		
Eye doctor (ophthalmologist)		
Foot doctor (podiatrist)		
Dentist		
Counselor		

Resources

American Diabetes Association: <http://www.diabetes.org>.

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases:
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/diabetes>

References

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