

Skin conditions

Key Points

When you have diabetes:

- You are more likely to develop skin problems
- Skin problems are more likely to become infected, especially if your blood glucose levels are high
- It is best to seek early help for any skin problem as it can easily get worse
- If you are a person who's prone to developing dry skin it's best to take action to keep your skin more supple. This includes protecting your skin from harsh chemicals, harsh weather and harsh soaps. It also includes using a light moisturiser on your skin regularly
- You are far less likely to develop skin problems if you take good care of your skin, and have healthy blood glucose, blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels

Up to a third of people with diabetes will have a skin disorder caused or affected by diabetes at some time in their lives. In fact, such problems are sometimes the first sign that a person has diabetes. Luckily, most skin conditions can be prevented or easily treated if caught early.

Some of these problems are skin conditions that anyone can have, but that people with diabetes get more easily. These include bacterial infections, fungal infections, and itching.

Fungal Infections

Fungal infections in people with diabetes are very often caused by the yeast-like fungus called *Candida Albicans* (or thrush). It can create itchy rashes of moist, red areas surrounded by tiny blisters and scales. These infections often occur in warm, moist folds of the skin. Problem areas are:

- in the mouth
- under the breasts
- around the nails
- between fingers and toes
- in the corners of the mouth
- under the foreskin (in uncircumcised men)
- in the armpits and groin
- in the vagina in women

Other common fungal infections include athlete's foot, ringworm (a ring-shaped itchy patch) and vaginal infection that causes itching.

If you think you have a yeast or fungal infection, talk to your doctor. You will need to have it diagnosed before you can treat it.

Bacterial Infections

Several kinds of bacterial infections occur in people with diabetes, including:

- styes, which are infections of the glands of the eyelid
- boils, which are infections of the hair follicles
- carbuncles, which are deep infections of the skin and the tissue underneath

Infections can also occur around the nails.

Infected tissues are usually hot, swollen, red, and painful. Several different organisms can cause infections. The most common ones are the *Staphylococcus* bacteria, sometimes also called Staph.

Health professionals believe people with diabetes can reduce their chances of these infections in several ways (see "[Good Skin Care](#)" below).

If you think you have a bacterial infection, see your doctor.

Itching

Localised itching is often caused by diabetes. It can be caused by a yeast infection, dry skin, or poor circulation. When poor circulation is the cause of itching, the itchiest areas may be the lower parts of the legs.

You may be able to reduce itching yourself. Take care not to rub the skin hard when bathing or showering. Use mild soap with moisturiser and apply a light moisturising skin cream after bathing.

Dry Skin

Rough, dry and scaly skin affects most people with diabetes over the age of 60. Dry skin can be found on particular parts of the body, for example, on the legs, feet, hands and/or face. Or it can progress to all parts of the skin. In more serious cases the skin loses its suppleness. It can then crack and become red and inflamed.

Itching is the most obvious symptom. Aside from being irritating, dry skin can be made worse if you scratch and rub it. Scratching can also lead to infection, or even ulcers.

Often, dry skin is caused by things we cannot control. It often happens in winter because:

- heating your house can lower the humidity (amount of moisture in the air) which can lead to drying
- cold, dry winter winds tend to dry the skin

Allergic Reactions

Allergic skin reactions can sometimes occur in response to medicines. You should see your doctor if you think you are having a reaction to a medicine. Be on the lookout for rashes starting soon after you have commenced a new medicine.

Good Skin Care

There are several things you can do to head off skin problems:

- Keep your blood glucose levels in as healthy a range as you can. When your blood glucose levels are high you are more prone to have dry skin and you are less able to fend off harmful bacteria. This can increase your risk of infection
- Keep your skin clean and dry. Use talcum powder or anti chaffing cream in areas where skin touches skin, such as armpits and groin
- Protect your skin. For example, wear gloves when using cleaners, solvents and other household detergents
- Avoid very hot baths and showers. If your skin is dry don't use bubble baths. Moisturising soaps may help. After washing, use a light moisturising skin cream (e.g., BK lotion or Vaseline Intensive Care lotion). But don't put lotions between your toes. Extra moisture there can encourage fungus to grow
- Where possible prevent dry skin. If you scratch dry or itchy skin it can open up and infection can set in. Moisturise your skin to keep it supple and prevent chapping especially in cold or windy weather
- Treat cuts right away. Wash minor cuts with soap and water. Do not use alcohol or iodine to clean skin because they are too harsh. Only use an antibiotic cream or ointment if your doctor says it's okay. Cover minor cuts with sterile gauze. See a doctor right away if you get a major cut, burn, or infection. If you have nerve damage or poor circulation in your feet you should immediately see a doctor if you get any sort of cut on your feet
- During cold, dry months, keep your home more humid
- Use mild shampoos and unscented soaps. Do not use feminine hygiene sprays
- See a dermatologist (skin doctor) about skin problems if you or your doctor are concerned
- Take good care of your feet. Check them every day for sores and cuts. Wear broad, flat shoes that fit well. Check your shoes for foreign objects before putting them

on

If you'd like more information on skin conditions that happen mostly or only to people with diabetes, go to our "[Diabetes-Related Skin Conditions](#)" section.

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