

# Diabetes Prevention in Children & Teens

By Kristen Schroeder, BSN-RN, CHES

**Currently, the number of children and teens diagnosed with type 2 diabetes is increasing.**

## The American Diabetes Association (ADA) states:

- Type 2 diabetes [in children and teens] is on the rise.
- By the year 2050, one in three people will have diabetes.
- Children of certain racial and ethnic groups are at higher risk, including African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American children.

## What is Type 2 Diabetes?

Diabetes means you have too much sugar (or glucose) in your blood. Your body changes most of the food you eat into glucose. The glucose then travels in your blood to all of the cells in your body. In turn, your pancreas makes a hormone called insulin to help the sugar move out of your blood and into your cells. Your cells need this sugar to provide you with energy during the day. With Type 2 diabetes, your body cannot use the insulin produced correctly. Without insulin, your cells would not receive the sugar they need to function and the glucose levels in your blood begin to rise.

## Signs and Symptoms of Type 2 Diabetes in Children & Teens:

Unfortunately, most of the time children and teens often have no signs or symptoms of diabetes. However, it is still important to know that the common signs and symptoms of type 2 diabetes are:

- Increased thirst
- Frequent urination
- Blurry vision
- Feeling more tired than usual

If you notice any of these signs or symptoms, it is important that the child or teen see their health care provider as soon as possible.

## Risk Factors for Diabetes:

Children or teens may be at greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes, if they:

- Are overweight or obese
- Are not physically active
- Have a family member that has type 2 diabetes

For children and teens, the number one risk factor for developing diabetes is being overweight or obese. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), “one in five school-aged children has obesity” and this number is expected to increase over time.

## Importance of Preventing or Delaying the Onset of Type 2 Diabetes in Children and Teens

Currently, there is no cure for diabetes. Once you are diagnosed with diabetes you will always have diabetes. Having diabetes can lead to other serious health problems, such as, blindness, kidney failure, heart disease, stroke, and even the loss of your toes, feet, or legs.

Diabetes progresses more quickly in children and teens than adults. Children with type 2 diabetes develop signs and symptoms of complications at a much faster rate. According to Kenneth Copeland, MD and director of the children's program at the Harold Hamm Diabetes Center, “type 2 diabetes, when it occurs in youth, is a very, very, very rapidly progressing and serious disease—far worse than in the more typical 50-, 60-, or 70-year old person who develops

diabetes”. For children and teens that develop type 2 diabetes, complications including heart disease and kidney disease set in early. According to Dr. Silva Arslanian, MD, a pediatric endocrinologist, “By the time they're in their thirties or forties they may have their first event—maybe a heart attack or stroke or something of the sort... only time will tell.” Additionally, the TODAY researchers have found that when children or teens develop diabetes, they experience a 20 to 35% decline in the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas each year, which is three to four times more than that in adults.

Therefore, it is so important to work on preventing or delaying the onset of type 2 diabetes in children and teens that are at high risk of developing it.

## Ways to Prevent Type 2 Diabetes in Children and Teens

Children and teens may be able to prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes for many years by making these small changes—losing weight, eating healthy, and getting active. Losing weight may seem hard for some individuals, but with proper instruction and support it is proven to make the biggest impact in preventing type 2 diabetes.

## When it comes to eating healthy, it is important to:

- Drink plenty of water
- Limit the amount of sugary drinks including sodas, juices, or sports drinks
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Limit the amount of fast food
- Make healthy snacks

## When it comes to getting more active, it is important to:

- Limit the amount of time spent in front of a TV, computer, or phone
- Engage in an activity that is fun and enjoyable
- Get the whole family involved

Children and teens should be getting at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day.

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