

Diabetes: Infections

Why are infections a concern if I have diabetes?

If you have diabetes, you have a higher risk of infections than people who don't have diabetes. Infections you are more likely to have include:

- Bladder or kidney infections
- Thrush, gum disease, and other mouth infections
- Fungal infections, such as athlete's foot and nail and skin infections
- Infections of the vagina, especially yeast infections
- Wound infections
- Foot infections

Even a small cut on the foot, for example, may not heal well and may develop into a serious, life-threatening problem requiring amputation of your foot.

There are several reasons you may have more infections because of your diabetes:

- High blood sugar levels seem to help the growth of some bacteria and yeast.
- Poor blood flow can make it hard for the body to fight infection in even small scrapes and cuts.
- High blood sugar levels may make it harder for your immune system to fight infections.
- You may not feel injuries to your feet, legs, or hands because of nerve damage and numbness. Without treatment the injuries may get infected.

How are the infections treated?

Most importantly, your diabetes must be controlled. Because some bacteria and yeast seem to thrive when blood sugar is high, part of the infection treatment includes good control of your blood sugar.

Your healthcare provider will prescribe antibiotics or antifungal medicine for your infection. If your foot or leg is infected, you will probably have to rest your foot or leg for days or weeks, depending on how severe the infection is and how quickly it's healing. You may need physical therapy treatments to help your foot heal. The therapist may also check how you are walking, how well your shoes fit, and if your shoes protect your feet. Sometimes a foot specialist (podiatrist) may help with your foot care. If you are having foot problems, you may need shoes specially designed to protect your feet from injury.

Your infection will take longer to heal than an infection in someone who doesn't have diabetes because the blood supply to your feet and legs is often not as good. If there is any question about whether the infection is healing too slowly or if it is too deep to heal easily, you may be referred to a healthcare provider who specializes in treating difficult infections in people who have diabetes. You will probably need to have frequent follow-up visits.

All parts of treating diabetic infections (diabetes control, medicine, physical therapy, and rest), especially infections of the feet and legs, are important in preventing amputations. But the cornerstone of preventing amputations and other complications is good blood sugar control.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your healthcare provider's instructions.
- Be aware of your increased risk of infections and the serious problems caused by infections if they are not treated promptly.
- Watch for sores in your mouth, lips, tongue, or gums. White, painful patches on your tongue or in your mouth may be thrush. Thrush is a fungal infection that can spread internally to other parts of your body if it is not treated.
- Check your feet every day.
- Ask your provider:
 - How and when you will hear your test results
 - How long it will take to recover
 - What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
 - How to take care of yourself at home
 - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

How can I avoid getting infections?

- Never go barefoot, not even in the house. Even minor cuts can become seriously infected.
- Examine your feet at the end of each day to make sure there are no reddened areas, cuts, or scrapes that could become infected. Use a mirror to see the bottoms of your feet, if you need to. You may see cuts, sores, or blisters you cannot feel because of nerve damage.
- After bathing, carefully dry your feet, including between the toes, to prevent skin breakdown. Use lotion to moisturize your skin. Skin that is dry and cracked offers openings for bacteria to enter and cause infection. Do not put lotion between your toes because it may keep the skin in that area too moist.
- Do not treat corns or calluses by yourself. Especially do not treat them with razor blades or chemical products. Ask for help from your healthcare provider.
- Take special care trimming your toenails. Learn how to do it properly or have a diabetic foot specialist do it for you. Injuries around the toenails are a common source of foot infections.
- Wear well-fitting socks and shoes to protect your feet from injury.
- Keep your appointments with your healthcare provider for your regular diabetes and foot checks.

Developed by RelayHealth.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.