

Patient education: The ABCs of diabetes (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What can I do to stay as healthy as possible if I have diabetes? — If you have diabetes (sometimes called diabetes mellitus), the most important thing you can do is to control your "ABCs":

- **"A" stands for "A1C"** – A1C is a blood test that shows what your average blood sugar level has been during the last few months.
- **"B" stands for "blood pressure"** – If you have diabetes, controlling your blood pressure is just as important as controlling your blood sugar. High blood pressure puts you at risk for heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease.
- **"C" stands for "cholesterol"** – Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in the blood. High cholesterol is another factor that increases your risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other serious problems.

Why are my ABCs so important? — Compared with people who do not have diabetes, people who have diabetes are 2 to 3 times more likely to have a heart attack or a stroke. People with diabetes also have heart attacks at a younger age, and that are more severe and more deadly. Plus, people with diabetes are much more likely to get kidney disease. By keeping your ABCs under control, you can lower your risk of these problems by a lot.

Isn't my blood sugar the most important thing? — Keeping blood sugar low is important in preventing some problems caused by diabetes, including:

- Eye diseases that lead to vision loss or blindness
- Kidney disease
- Nerve damage (called "neuropathy") that can cause numbness or pain in the hands and feet
- The need to have toes, fingers, or other body parts removed by surgery (amputated)

Even so, blood sugar is just one of the things that should get your attention. That's because the problems caused by high blood pressure and high cholesterol are often more serious than the ones caused by high blood sugar.

What should my ABC levels be? — The levels you should aim for will depend on how severe your diabetes is, how old you are, and what other health problems you have. Ask your doctor or nurse what your target levels should be.

Many people with diabetes aim for:

- A1C levels below 7 percent
- Blood pressure below 140/90, or lower in some cases
- LDL cholesterol level below 100 (LDL is one type of cholesterol, often called the "bad cholesterol" or "lousy cholesterol")

How can I control my ABCs? — You and your doctor will work together to create a plan to keep your ABCs under control. Your plan might include:

- **Medicines** – Most people with diabetes take medicine every day to control their blood sugar. They might also need to check their blood sugar level every day. Plus, many people with diabetes need medicines every day to treat high blood pressure or high cholesterol, or to prevent future health problems. If you have any problems with your medicines, or you cannot afford them, talk to your doctor or nurse about these issues.
- **Lifestyle changes** – Choices you make every day about the foods you eat and the way you live can have a big impact on your ABCs and your general health. Here are some things you can do to help keep your ABCs under control or reduce your health risks:
 - Make healthy food choices – Eat lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. Limit the amount of meat and fried or fatty foods that you eat.
 - Be active – Walk, garden, or do something active for 30 minutes or more on most days of the week.
 - Stop smoking – Smoking increases the chance that you will have a heart attack or stroke, or develop cancer.
 - Lose weight – Being overweight increases the risk of many health problems.
 - Avoid alcohol – Alcohol can increase blood sugar and blood pressure.

Luckily, many of the lifestyle changes above can improve all 3 of the ABCs. For instance, being active and losing weight can help control blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels ([table 1](#)).

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GRAPHICS

Ways to get your ABCs under control

What you can do	Helps with A1C	Helps with blood pressure	Helps with cholesterol
Take your medicines every day	X	X	X
Eat a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol but rich in fruits and vegetables and low-fat dairy products	X	X	X
Limit the amount of salt (sodium) you eat		X	
Be active	X	X	X
Lose weight if you are overweight	X	X	X
Avoid alcohol	X	X	

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