

Children's Services: Information and Education

What is Type 1 Diabetes?

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Diabetes is the name given to the condition when the pancreas stops making insulin. Between the stomach and the backbone is an organ called the pancreas. It does many things but one of its jobs is to produce insulin. Insulin is a hormone which allows the body to make use of sugar, or glucose, which has passed into the blood stream from the stomach after eating. Without insulin the sugar cannot be absorbed into the body tissues such as muscle and it is passed out in the urine. Your child needs to drink a lot of fluid to help pass out this sugar. You will now understand why your child has probably been passing a lot of urine and therefore having to drink a lot. Most children with diabetes have also lost weight by the time the diagnosis is made. This is because the body switches over to using fuels other than sugar to get energy.

How common is type 1 diabetes in children?

Diabetes in children is quite common. We see around 35 - 40 new cases every year in Tayside and currently have over 250 children coming to our clinics. Scotland has one of the highest levels of diabetes in the world but the reasons are still unknown

What treatment is necessary?

Unfortunately, diabetes cannot be cured because the part of the pancreas that makes insulin is permanently damaged. However, giving insulin by injection allows the body to run normally again. Another part of the treatment is taking care over what food is eaten. Families with someone with diabetes often find that they all eat more healthily.

We know that life with diabetes is not easy but our emphasis all the time is on making the life of a patient with diabetes as normal as possible. There are very few things that someone with diabetes can't do and very few careers that they can't follow but we will give you as much advice about these matters as you wish later on.

What causes diabetes?

We don't know the cause but there are probably several parts to the answer. Some people are born with genes that put them in a higher risk than average of developing diabetes. Perhaps they then get a mild virus infection which may cause just a cold or "flu" but for some other reason this triggers a reaction in them which causes damage to their pancreas. We believe that this occurs over several months, even years, before the diabetes actually develops and a lot of research is going on to find out more about this process, so that in the future, it might be prevented.

Can other friends or relatives catch diabetes?

No. Diabetes isn't infectious. However, when one member of a family becomes diabetic this is a signal that others (brothers, sisters and parents) may have a higher risk of developing diabetes too. About 1 in 10 of children with diabetes will have someone else in the family who is also diabetic. This is because of the importance of the genes we are born with as mentioned above.