

Diabetic Infections

How do infections occur as a complication of diabetes?

Diabetics are especially at risk of getting the following types of infections:

- bladder or kidney infections
- thrush, gum disease, and other mouth infections
- fungal infections
- infections of the vagina
- wound infections
- foot infections.

Even a small cut on the foot, for example, may not heal well and may develop into a potentially life-threatening problem.

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

- You may not be aware of injuries to your feet, legs, or hands because of numbness and the injuries may become infected.
- High blood sugar levels seem to help the growth of some bacteria and yeast.
- High blood sugar levels may keep white blood cells from fighting infections well.
- Poor blood supply to feet and legs can prevent the body's immune system from fighting off infection in even small scrapes and cuts.

How are the infections treated?

Most importantly, your diabetes must be controlled.

We may prescribe specific antibiotics for your infection. If the infection is on your foot or leg, you will probably have to rest that foot or leg for days to weeks.

Your infection will take longer to heal than an infection in a nondiabetic. 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 another doctor who specializes in treating difficult infections in diabetics. You will likely 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.

How can I take care of myself?

- Be aware of your increased risk of infections and the serious complications of infections that are not treated.
- Watch for sores in your mouth or on your lips. 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.
- Tell us about any discharge from the vagina or penis, changes in the color or odor of your urine, or burning or painful urination.
- See us right away if you suspect something is wrong (for example, you have a fever) or if a minor injury is not healing. Immediately report any tingling, numbness, or change in color or sensation in your fingertips and toes.

How can I avoid getting infections?

- Never go barefoot. Even minor cuts can become seriously infected.
- Examine your feet with a mirror at the end of each day to make sure there are no reddened areas, cuts, or scrapes that could become infected. You may see cuts or sores you cannot feel because of nerve damage.
- After bathing, carefully dry between your toes to prevent skin breakdown. Use lotion to moisturize the skin. Skin that is dry and cracked offers openings for bacteria to enter and cause infection.
- Do not try to treat corns or calluses by yourself. Especially do not treat them with razor blades or chemical products.
- 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.