

Schizophrenia and diabetes: What is the link?

People with schizophrenia develop more medical illnesses than people without schizophrenia. One medical illness that occurs more frequently in people with schizophrenia is type 2 diabetes.¹

Key terms

Connections between schizophrenia and type 2 diabetes may be better understood when you learn some key terms:

- **Glucose and insulin:** Glucose is the body's main source of energy. It is made when the body breaks down sugars and starches. After glucose gets into your blood, it combines with insulin, a chemical produced by the pancreas (an organ in the upper belly that helps your body break down and process food). Insulin takes glucose from your bloodstream into your body's cells. Then glucose provides the fuel your body needs to complete physical and mental activities.
- **Insulin resistance and impaired glucose tolerance:** Insulin resistance occurs when your body does not make enough insulin or your body's cells do not use insulin the right way. Insulin resistance causes glucose levels in the blood to be higher than they should be. Higher than normal blood glucose levels are referred to as impaired glucose tolerance.
- **Metabolic syndrome:** Metabolic syndrome refers to problems that occur with impaired glucose tolerance and insulin resistance. These problems include high blood pressure, high LDL (bad) cholesterol, low HDL (good) cholesterol, large waist size and obesity.
- **Type 2 diabetes:** This illness occurs when glucose levels in the blood are much higher than they should be.

How are schizophrenia and diabetes linked?

There are many reasons why having schizophrenia may increase your risk for developing medical problems related to type 2 diabetes.²

- **Poor diet:** Because of the easy access and low cost of fast food, many persons have unhealthy diets. An unhealthy diet is especially risky for people with schizophrenia because they are at higher risk for developing metabolic syndrome and type 2 diabetes. Some foods that are unhealthy when eaten in large amounts are high saturated fat foods (burgers and fries), high sugar foods (cookies and cakes), and high carbohydrate foods (white bread).

¹ <https://www.webmd.com/schizophrenia/schizophrenia-diabetes>

² Ibid

- **Too little exercise:** For people with schizophrenia, too little exercise is dangerous. It can lead to obesity, which can lead to metabolic syndrome.
- **Smoking:** Smoking is unsafe for people with schizophrenia because smoking is linked to the development of metabolic syndrome.
- **Medicines:** Some medicines used to treat schizophrenia are linked to the development of metabolic syndrome.

Addressing the link

There are many steps you can take to control risk factors for or complications of type 2 diabetes. One step that is NOT advisable is stopping prescribed medicines. Stopping medicines (either for schizophrenia or type 2 diabetes) without a doctor’s okay may result in problems managing both illnesses. Healthy steps you can take include:

- **Maintaining a healthy diet.**
 - Consume less fat. Drink low-fat or skim milk instead of whole milk. Use small amounts of butter or margarine. Eat light meat chicken or turkey. Cut down on cheese and eggs.
 - Eat more:
 - Whole grains—Foods with whole grains include whole wheat bread, brown rice, oatmeal and puff-grain cereals.
 - Fruits and veggies—Eating fruits and veggies makes you feel fuller longer. Fruits and veggies contain many things that are good for you.
 - Eat fish. Fish is good for your heart and mind.
 - Use olive, canola or sesame oil instead of corn or vegetable oil.³
 - Cut down on sugar. Eat half of your dessert. Drink low-calorie drinks or water.
- **Getting enough exercise.** Talk with your doctor before starting to exercise. Always start out slow and build up to prevent injuries. For example, going from a five-minute slow walk two times per week to a 30-minute brisk walk three times per week. Also, keep a realistic outlook about your progress.
- **Stopping or reducing smoking.** Discuss options with your doctor. Your doctor can help you choose the method that is best for you.
- **Monitor and manage your health.**
 - Get a checkup at least every year and more often if you have signs of metabolic syndrome. A complete health checkup should include weight, waist size, blood pressure, fasting glucose level and fasting fat (cholesterol and triglyceride) levels.
 - Give your written okay for your psychiatrist and primary care doctor to talk with each other about your health care. This will help them make sure you get the best care possible.

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.

³ <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm>