A guide to insulin-dependent diabetes (type 1 diabetes)

What is type 1 diabetes?

Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disease. This means the immune system, which normally fights infections in the body, attacks a part of the body instead. With diabetes, the immune system attacks and destroys important cells in the pancreas. These cells normally make insulin, which is our body’s tool to process our blood sugar, glucose. Because of this, the pancreas can’t make enough insulin. A person with type 1 diabetes must have an insulin shot every day to live.

Who can get it?

Scientists don’t know exactly why the immune system attacks the beta cells in the pancreas. They think it could be genetic or caused by things in the environment, or maybe even viruses are involved. Of all the diabetes cases diagnosed in the U.S.,
about 5% to 10% of them are type 1 diabetes. It’s most often found in children and young adults, and used to be called “juvenile diabetes.” But you can get type 1 diabetes at any age.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of type 1 diabetes come on quickly. Here’s what to watch for:

- Increased thirst
- Frequent urination (this can lead to bed-wetting in children)
- Constant hunger
- Weakness
- Rapid weight loss
- Blurred vision
- Extreme tiredness
- Irritability
- Nausea

If not diagnosed and treated with insulin, a person with type 1 diabetes can go into a life-threatening coma, also known as diabetic ketoacidosis (kee-toh-as-eh-doh-sis).

How is it treated?

Currently, there is no cure for type 1 diabetes. People with diabetes can live a healthy, active life. They must take insulin daily to help their body use glucose effectively. And they need to eat a healthy, balanced diet and exercise regularly. It’s important for people with type 1 diabetes to follow their doctor’s care plan and have regular checkups and tests, especially A1C tests, dilated retinal eye exams, kidney function tests and foot exams.

To read more about diabetes care, visit anthem.com. (Please register if you haven’t yet.)