Diabetes insipidus
Diabetes insipidus is characterised by extreme thirst and the passing of large amounts of urine. It is caused by the lack of sufficient vasopressin, a hormone produced by the brain that instructs the kidneys to retain water. Treatment options include vasopressin replacement.

Diabetes insipidus is characterised by extreme thirst and the passing of vast amounts of urine. It is caused by insufficient vasopressin, a hormone produced by the brain that instructs the kidneys to retain water. Without enough vasopressin, too much water is lost from the body in urine, which prompts the affected person to drink large amounts of fluids in an attempt to maintain their fluid levels. In severe cases, a person may pass up to 30 litres of urine per day. Without treatment, diabetes insipidus can cause dehydration and, eventually, coma due to concentration of salts in the blood, particularly sodium.

The name of this condition is a little misleading, since diabetes insipidus has nothing to do with diabetes mellitus (a condition characterised by high blood sugar levels), apart from the symptoms of thirst and passing large volumes of urine. The word diabetes means 'to go through' - describing the excessive urination. Insipidus means the urine is tasteless, whereas mellitus suggests it is sweet from its sugar content. This terminology dates back to a time when physicians literally dipped a finger in the patient's urine and tested its taste. Not a diagnostic method much in use today!

Symptoms

The symptoms of diabetes insipidus include:

- Extreme thirst that can't be quenched (polydipsia)
- Excessive amounts of urine (polyuria)
- Colourless urine instead of pale yellow
- Waking frequently through the night to urinate
- Dry skin
- Constipation
- Weak muscles
- Bedwetting.

Too much water is lost in the urine

The kidneys are organs of excretion. They filter the blood to remove wastes (such as urea) and regulate the amount of salts and water in the bloodstream. The hormone vasopressin is made by a structure in the brain called the hypothalamus. Vasopressin controls the amount of water excreted by the kidneys. Diabetes insipidus can be caused by two flaws in this process: the hypothalamus isn't making enough vasopressin or the kidneys aren't responding to the hormone. Either way, the result is the loss of too much water in the urine, leading to the characteristic symptom of excessive thirst.

There are various forms of diabetes insipidus

The forms of diabetes insipidus are categorised by cause and include:

- **Neurogenic** - the brain doesn't produce enough of the hormone vasopressin. Some of the events that could cause this form of diabetes insipidus include head injury, infection (such as meningitis), brain tumour, ruptured aneurysm or brain surgery. In about half of cases, the cause remains unknown (idiopathic neurogenic diabetes insipidus).
- **Nephrogenic** - the kidneys aren't sensitive to vasopressin and fail to respond. This comparatively rare form of diabetes insipidus is caused by an inherited disorder that affects the tubules, the tiny structures inside the kidneys that absorb water. Men are more prone to this condition than women. In adults nephrogenic diabetes insipidus can be caused by treatment with lithium and by hypercalcemia.

Possible complications

Without medical treatment, the possible complications of diabetes insipidus include:

- Chronic dehydration
- Low body temperature
- Accelerated heart rate
- Weight loss
- Fatigue
- Frequent headaches
- Low blood pressure (hypotension)
- Kidney damage
- Brain damage.
Diagnosis methods

Diabetes insipidus is diagnosed using a number of tests including:

- Medical history
- Physical examination
- Urine analysis
- Blood tests - to measure electrolyte levels
- Water deprivation test (to see how much urine is passed)
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan of the brain
- Computed tomography (CT) scans.

Treatment options

Treatment for diabetes insipidus (DI) depends on the cause. For DI that is associated with decreased vasopressin production, replacement of vasopressin is required. This is usually given by sniffing a small amount of vasopressin that can be absorbed through the lining of the nose. For DI that is associated with reduced or absent response to vasopressin, adequate replacement of fluids is necessary. Options include:

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Switch to a low salt diet.
- Medications like hydrochlorothiazide and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs may help.

Some forms of DI, such as those that occur following head injury or neurosurgery or during pregnancy, resolve with time.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Australian Pituitary Foundation Tel. 1300 331 807 email: support@pituitary.asn.au

Things to remember

- Diabetes insipidus is characterised by extreme thirst and the passing of large amounts of urine.
- It is caused by the lack of sufficient vasopressin, a hormone produced by the brain that instructs the kidneys to retain water.
- Treatment options include vasopressin replacement.

References

- The 4 types of DI [online], The Diabetes Insipidus Foundation Inc, USA. More information here.
- Robertson, G. L. [online], What is diabetes insipidus? More information here.

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Diabetes

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- Diabetes basics
- Types of diabetes
- Living with diabetes
- Complications with diabetes

Diabetes basics

- 10 tips to help prevent type 2 diabetes
  Lifestyle changes can prevent type 2 diabetes... 10 tips to help prevent type 2 diabetes...

- Diabetes
  Diabetes and the build-up of glucose (sugar) in the blood can cause serious complications if left untreated...

- Diabetes and insulin
  It may take a while to find the right insulin dose to reduce your blood glucose to acceptable levels..

- Exercise and diabetes (video)
  Healthy exercise is important for everyone. This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores the importance of exercise when you have diabetes..

- Health check
This health assessment questionnaire will identify which zones of your lifestyle are contributing to your personal health risk and provide actions you can take to make positive change.

- **Managing my diabetes (video)**
  This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores managing your diabetes.

- **My feet and diabetes (video)**
  When you have diabetes you need to take care of your feet every day. This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores footcare and diabetes.

- **Type 2 Diabetes - Pre Diabetes (video)**
  For some people with a family history of type 2 diabetes, diagnosis in later life doesn’t come as a surprise. Others can go for years without realising that they are living with the condition.

### Types of diabetes

- **Diabetes - gestational**
  Gestational diabetes is diabetes that occurs during pregnancy and usually disappears when the pregnancy is over.

- **Diabetes insipidus**
  Diabetes insipidus is characterised by extreme thirst and the passing of vast amounts of urine.

- **Diabetes - pre-diabetes**
  Pre-diabetes has no symptoms or warning signs, and is a risk factor for developing type 2 diabetes.

- **Diabetes type 1**
  Type 1 diabetes can affect anyone of any age, but is more common in people under 30 years.

- **Diabetes type 2**
  Type 2 diabetes may be prevented, but it cannot be cured.

- **Managing my diabetes (video)**
  This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores managing your diabetes.

- **Type 2 Diabetes - Pre Diabetes (video)**
  For some people with a family history of type 2 diabetes, diagnosis in later life doesn’t come as a surprise. Others can go for years without realising that they are living with the condition.

### Living with diabetes

- **Diabetes and exercise**
  Exercise is an important lifestyle choice for everyone. For people with diabetes or at risk of diabetes, exercise is still an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

- **Diabetes and healthy eating**
  Healthy eating for people with diabetes is no different than for everyone else.

- **Diabetes and healthy eating (video)**
  Healthy eating is important for everyone. This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores healthy eating and food choices.

- **Diabetes and oral health**
  People with poorly controlled diabetes have a higher risk of tooth and gum problems.

- **Diabetes - foot care**
  Good foot care and regular check-ups can help people with diabetes avoid foot problems.

- **Diabetes - issues for children and teenagers**
  Many parents worry when their child with diabetes starts or returns to school.

- **Diabetes - long-term effects**
  The risk of most diabetes-related complications can be reduced.

- **Exercise and diabetes (video)**
  Healthy exercise is important for everyone. This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores the importance of exercise when you have diabetes.
• Getting active - tucker talk tips
  The main thing is to choose physical activities that you enjoy and that you can stick to in the long term...

• Managing my diabetes (video)
  This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores managing your diabetes...

Complications with diabetes

• Blood pressure (high) - hypertension
  Hypertension, or high blood pressure, can increase your risk of heart attack, kidney failure and stroke...

• Diabetes and erectile dysfunction
  Men with diabetes are more prone to problems with erectile dysfunction or impotence...

• Diabetic coma
  Diabetic coma is a medical emergency and needs prompt medical treatment...

• Diabetic neuropathy
  Diabetes is the most common cause of neuropathy...

• Diabetic retinopathy
  Without treatment, diabetic retinopathy can cause loss of vision and blindness...

• Heart disease - know your risk
  Risk factors for heart disease include smoking, diabetes, obesity, family history and age...

• Hyperglycaemia
  Hyperglycaemia means too much glucose is circulating in the blood...

• Hypoglycaemia
  Hypoglycaemia refers to symptoms caused by low blood glucose. The most common reason for hypoglycaemia is diabetes medication...

• Kidney failure
  You can lose up to 90 per cent of kidney function before you even feel sick...

• Managing my diabetes (video)
  This video from Diabetes Australia – Victoria explores managing your diabetes...

Related Information

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• Life! Taking Action on Diabetes
• Pituitary Foundation, UK

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