

Health Issue Brief:

Diabetes

Background

Diabetes is a disease that affects the body's ability to produce or use insulin, which is a natural hormone that regulates the level of sugar (*glucose*) in the body. When an individual's pancreas does not produce insulin, it is referred to as type 1 diabetes. With type 2 diabetes, the body produces insulin but does not use it correctly. It is estimated that diabetes costs the United States \$327 billion annually in medical costs and lost wages.¹

Managing Diabetes Holistically

Diabetes is considered incurable; however, the symptoms can be managed through a whole-person wellness regimen. This typically includes prescriptions, like insulin, to support healthy blood glucose levels. While successful diabetes management relies on interconnected social and lifestyle supports, individuals living with diabetes also require access to affordable insulin and nutritious food. Additionally, their health outcomes are improved when they have the opportunity to be physically active and achieve financial stability. Each of these components of holistic diabetes management are discussed in detail below.

Insulin Affordability

As a chronic disease, a key part of managing diabetes requires monitoring glucose levels. Controlling glucose levels often involves prescription insulin. As drug prices have continued to climb, the list price of insulin tripled from 2002 to 2013, passing along a greater cost burden to patients.² Patients often find themselves having to choose between food or insulin, even though both are essential to controlling diabetes.

Key Highlights:

- Diabetes affects approximately 9.4 million Americans.
- Managing diabetes is a combination of clinical interventions and lifestyle changes, meaning care for the whole person is essential.
- Diabetes is affected by exercise, nutrition and insulin. Access to healthy food and places to exercise, as well as the ability to afford insulin are all dependent on an individual's socioeconomic status.
- Insulin costs have more than tripled over the past decade.
- Inability to afford insulin can lead to the dangerous practice of insulin rationing and ultimately adverse outcomes and avoidable hospitalizations.
- People with diabetes spend an average of \$9,601 on this condition alone.

¹ American Diabetes Association, [The Cost of Diabetes.](#)

² Maier, K. & Riley, M., American Diabetes Association, [Improving Insulin Access and Affordability](#)

Nutritious Food

In addition to insulin production, blood glucose levels are influenced by what an individual eats. Access to nutritious food is a critical component of managing diabetes, making food security essential for a healthy lifestyle. Food insecurity (limited food access due to cost) is associated with higher A1C levels—a protein that can indicate poor management of diabetes.³ Insulin costs may affect a patient’s ability to afford healthy food while also maintaining control over their blood sugar.

Regular Exercise

Along with a healthy diet and insulin regimen, exercise can also help control blood sugar for individuals living with diabetes. Exercise may be encouraged by urban greenspaces and outdoor recreational areas.

Financial Stability

People with diabetes incur annual medical expenses of \$16,752 on average, with \$9,601 attributed to diabetes.⁴ Accordingly, financial stability affects the ability to afford nutritious food and high-priced insulin. Job loss, unexpected expenses and income reduction can jeopardize a patient’s ability to afford the cost of managing their condition. Income-constrained individuals may resort to food or insulin rationing, which can put them at risk for diabetes-related complications. These complications can become an expensive burden on patients and health care systems, especially when they result in inpatient admissions.

³ Berkowitz, S., et al., American Diabetes Association Food Insecurity, [Food “Deserts,” and Glycemic Control in Patients With Diabetes: A Longitudinal Analysis](#)

⁴ American Diabetes Association, [Economic Costs of Diabetes in the U.S. in 2017](#)