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Choosing a type 2 diabetes drug

Why the best first choice is often the oldest drug

If you've been given a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes, you might assume you'll need medication to help control the disease. But lifestyle changes alone can sometimes lower your blood sugar levels enough that drugs aren't needed. And when they are, the best first choice usually isn't one of the newer, heavily advertised ones on the market. Instead, it's metformin, a drug that has been around for nearly two decades and is available as a low-cost generic. Here's why.

Newer drugs don't work as well

Metformin, which is also sold under the brand name Glucophage, lowers blood sugar levels more than newer drugs do. That includes Actos (pioglitazone), Avandia (rosiglitazone), Glyset (miglitol), Januvia (sitagliptin), Onglyza (saxagliptin), Precose (acarbose and generic), and Starlix (nateglinide and generic). Metformin can also lower levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol, the kind that contributes to heart disease. In contrast, the newer drugs either have no effect on LDL cholesterol or, in some cases, can actually raise it. Finally, metformin usually doesn't cause weight gain, and might actually help people lose weight, while some of



the other drugs can increase it by as much as 5 to 10 percent.

Newer drugs are no safer

Metformin is less likely than some other diabetes drugs to cause low blood sugar levels. That can lead to sweating, shaking, dizziness, hunger and, in rare cases, even life-threatening complications. And while metformin is more strongly linked to minor side effects such as bloating, diarrhea, gas, and nausea,

it's less likely than some of the newer drugs to cause several very serious complications. Those risks include heart failure with Avandia and Actos, and possibly heart attack and stroke with Avandia.

Newer drugs cost more

Metformin can cost as little as \$4 for a month's supply or \$10 for a three-month supply, through discount generic-drug programs at major chain stores, including Kroger, Sam's Club, Target, and Walmart. Even if you don't have access to one of those discount programs, a month's supply of generic metformin typically costs only about \$14 compared with about \$230 to \$370 for Actos and about \$265 for Januvia.

When should you take other diabetes drugs?

You should not take metformin if you have heart failure or moderate to severe kidney disease. In those situations, metformin can sometimes cause a potentially fatal buildup of lactic acid. In addition, lifestyle changes combined with metformin don't always lower blood sugar levels enough. In those cases, it is often necessary to add a second drug.

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Consumer Reports Advice

Managing diabetes without drugs

A Consumer Reports survey of 5,012 people with type 2 diabetes identified the steps that most helped them to manage the disease and avoid its complications. Here are some of the most important ones.

- **Eat less.** Contrary to popular belief, the most important dietary strategy in our survey wasn't limiting sugar or counting carbs but simply eating less. One effective way to do that is to replace your large plates at home with smaller ones. And when dining out, take home half of your entrée for the following day. Or try the "pick two" strategy. Choose a main course and just two of following: bread, appetizer, dessert, or alcoholic drink.

- **Exercise more.** Light to moderate physical activity can often help by increasing the amount of sugar burned by the muscles. Walking was the most popular form of exercise in our survey. But anything that gets you moving, like gardening or dancing, might help, too. Biking and swimming are especially good choices if you have nerve damage in your feet. Talk with a health-care provider first if you plan to start a vigorous exercise program.



- **Put together the right team.** Our survey suggests that no single health-care provider covers all the bases. Certified diabetes educators, endocrinologists, and registered dietitians were among the providers that our survey respondents said most considered their specific needs.