

Taking Control: How to talk diabetes with your doctor

No matter how many times you've been to the doctor's office in your lifetime, life changes when you learn you have diabetes.

Life with diabetes means making changes in the amounts and kinds of food you eat. Changes in the way you exercise. And changes in your reaction to stressful situations.

One other important thing changed, too: the way you must interact with your doctor now that you have diabetes.

What's so different? Well, think about all the times you've visited your doctor in the past. Most likely, your body let you know something wasn't quite right, so you shared that with your doctor, who gave you advice or medicine to make things better. In many ways, you were an observer, watching things happen to you.

Diabetes is different. Diabetes demands that you take more control, get involved and participate in your own health care.

Your doctor will still run tests, give you advice and write prescriptions for medicines. But now, he or she will depend on you like never before. Your doctor will count on you to share openly and honestly what is happening with your diabetes and how it is affecting you. He or she will expect you to take the advice to heart and to make the kinds of changes in your life that can lead to a long and healthy life. Finally, he or she will welcome you as an active, learning partner in the management of your diabetes.

THE PILLARS OF A GREAT PARTNERSHIP.

Know your disease.

In order to understand how to control diabetes, you have to first understand how the disease works.

Replace your fear of diabetes with knowledge. Learn the science of what's happening (or not happening) in your body that's the cause of the disease. You don't have to be a medical expert – you don't even have to be good at science. In fact, it's more important to understand diabetes in your own words and in a way that makes sense to you.

Go one on one with diabetes at least five minutes every day.

That may seem like an odd suggestion for someone who's already living with diabetes 24 hours a day. But set aside a little time each day to intentionally deal with your disease.

- Keep a copy of a diabetes-related magazine such as *The American Diabetes Association's Diabetes Forecast* by your bed and read just one article before you go to sleep. And if you haven't already joined the American Diabetes Association or other diabetes organizations make that a priority.
- Discuss with your health care team foods that fit with your diet plan.

- Pick up a book from your local bookstore and read a few pages at lunch.
- Get on-line and find out what advancements are being made in treating diabetes.

After a while, you'll find that your confidence in dealing with diabetes has grown. Managing the disease will become second nature. And you'll be able to discuss diabetes with your health care team as easily as you share a cup of coffee with a neighbor.

Who is your diabetes?

Some people with diabetes find it helpful to put a face to their disease. For some, diabetes is a monster. For others, it's a sports competitor. Still others see it as an uninvited shadow. There are probably as many faces for diabetes as there are people who have it. But thinking through this simple exercise can help you make your approach to managing diabetes more personal and more effective.

Take control now and live for the future.

How close are we to the cure? No one knows. Certainly, there have been huge advancements in the past few years. There is reason for hope.

But manage your diabetes as if there will never be a cure. That way, you'll be in great shape to take advantage of future treatment advances.

Know yourself.

Every person has strengths and weaknesses. It's important to understand both in order to manage your diabetes.

You can't completely change diabetes or its management to fit your personality. But you *can* put your personality to work to make managing diabetes easier.

Again, the goal is to develop a personal approach to diabetes. One that allows you to use everything you've got going for you to manage the disease.

Partner with your health care team.

Diabetes can be frustrating. It can be affected by so many things, from eating too much to not eating enough, from sick days to stress.

But diabetes isn't only hard to live with, it's also hard to treat. Your health care team is made up of committed individuals working together to make a difference in your life and in the life of every patient they see.

Ask for and listen to their advice in dealing with the frustrations of diabetes. Chances are, they've dealt with the problems before.

And remember, perhaps more than any other disease, managing diabetes is a team effort. While your doctor will make the ultimate medical decisions, he or she will depend

on the observations and suggestions of nurses, diabetes educators, dietitians and others. And so should you.

Know how to bring the team together.

As a person in control of your diabetes, it's your job to make sure everyone and everything is working together to give you the best health care possible.

Start by letting your health care team know you're serious about managing your diabetes. Share your commitment to good control. Let them know you want to be an active partner in keeping your blood sugar at normal levels.

Be honest. The doctor and the team can't correct problems they don't know about. And they won't know unless you share.

Don't cheat. It's easy to feel as though you're disappointing your team if your blood sugar levels aren't where they (and you) want them to be. But it's critical that you be accurate when recording and sharing that information. Again, that is the only way you and your team can get and keep you at acceptable levels of control.

Be prepared for every visit.

While every office has its own procedures to follow, here are a few of the things you'll probably deal with when you visit your doctor. Knowing what to expect, and in some cases preparing for it before your visit, can help you get the most from the time you spend with your health care team.

INSURANCE

Make sure you bring your insurance card with you to your doctor's office on the day of your appointment. If you need a referral from your primary care doctor to see another doctor, be sure to arrange for that before your visit.

PAST MEDICAL HISTORY

Your health care team will want to know all about your past medical history. Jot down important information about other diseases you've had, as well as diseases or medical conditions other members of your family have experienced.

OTHER MEDICATIONS

Some medications can greatly affect your blood sugar levels. So be able to share with your team the information on all the prescription and over-the-counter drugs you're taking and their doses.

GLUCOSE RECORD

It may be the most important thing to bring with you on your visit. Be sure to write down your glucose readings AS YOU TEST! Keep your records up-to-date. And share them with your doctor and health care team.

DIETARY RECORD

You may be asked to write down the foods you've eaten in the last 24 hours. Sometimes, your doctor or dietitian will ask you to record your meals and snacks day by day for weeks or months.

Be sure to know when you last ate and last took your medication or insulin. This can affect the glucose test that a member of the health care team will do in the office.

WEIGHT

For patients, it's probably the most unpopular part of any doctor's visit, but it's important. Wear shoes you can easily slip out of to get an accurate picture of your height and weight.

URINE TEST

You may be asked to give a urine sample to test for proteins and ketones that can result from high blood sugars.

BLOOD PRESSURE

High blood pressure is a major cause of heart attacks and stroke. The test your health care team will conduct can spot serious problems early.

GLUCOSE TEST

Similar to the home monitoring you'll do, this simple blood-stick test will tell your doctor what your current blood glucose level is.

HbA_{1c}

A test that your doctor will regularly use to see if your blood sugar has been high over a period of 2 to 3 months is called a glycosylated hemoglobin test (also called a "hemoglobin A_{1c}" or "HbA_{1c}"). This test measures how much sugar has become attached to your red blood cells. If most of your recent blood sugars have been in the normal range, your hemoglobinA_{1c} test will also be normal. If you've had many higher-than-normal readings, your HbA_{1c} test will also be higher.

FOOT "FILAMENT" TEST

Diabetes can cause damage to the nerves that make your extremities sensitive to heat, cold and pain. Your health care professional will ask you to remove your shoes and socks; then they will gently touch the bottoms of your feet with a flexible nylon tool similar to a piece of fishing line. Your reaction to that painless touch will help determine if there has been a change in the response of your nerves.

Expect progress.

Dealing with diabetes can be slow-going. But if everything is working right, you should see signs of progress over time. If you don't, if your blood sugars continue at an unacceptable level, talk with your health care team. Ask if there are other lifestyle changes or medicines that you should pursue to get your diabetes under control.

Don't play the blame game.

Don't get discouraged. Diabetes isn't your fault, your family's fault or your doctors' fault.

Diabetes isn't a character flaw, either. Some doctors will stress the importance of dieting and physical activity by letting patients know what may happen if they don't. That's fair. But be honest with your doctor. If you've tried but you're having trouble losing weight, for example, ask what your health care team can do to help you. The important thing is to bring your blood sugar under control however possible.

Working with your health care team is a 24/7 partnership.

Diabetes is always with you. The time you spend in your doctor's office is a drop in the bucket compared to the time you'll be on your own dealing with diabetes.

So it's up to you to be on the lookout for things that your health care team should know. Watch for changes in blood sugar levels, in the way you feel and in your ability to do what your health care team has suggested.

If you have a concern, give your doctor a call. Your doctor wants you to successfully manage your diabetes. So if what he or she prescribed isn't having the effect it should, don't wait months until your next visit. Call.

Diabetes is personal. Make sure your control is, too.

Getting the most from your doctor's visit means making the way you approach and manage this disease as personal as diabetes itself.

It starts with knowing what and who you're dealing with and bringing all the players together in a way that works for you.

It continues with constant learning – learning about the disease and how to react to its constantly changing profile.

At times, it'll be frustrating. At others, it'll be rewarding. But in the long run, it can make all the difference in the world. Down the road, taking control will give you the chance to look back on a long, healthy and happy life.

The medical visit check list

What to bring, what to expect, what to ask about on your next visit with your doctor or health care team.

What to bring:

- Insurance card
- Primary care physician referral
- Past medical history
- Names and amounts of medications
- Glucose records
- Food record

What to expect:

- Weigh-in
- Urine test
- Blood pressure test
- Glucose test
- HbA_{1c}
- Foot test

What to ask about:

- Changes in the way you feel
- Prescribed changes in medications/behaviors
- Prescription renewals

Places to turn for more information:

AMERICAN DIABETES ASSOCIATION

Toll-free information hotline: **1-800-DIABETES**
www.diabetes.org

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF DIABETES EDUCATORS

To find a local diabetes educator: **1-800-Teamup4**
www.aadenet.org

DIABETESWATCH™

An on-line service that brings a world of diabetes management to your fingertips.
www.DiabetesWATCH.com

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