

Taking Control: Living a healthy lifestyle with diabetes

What is a “lifestyle”?

Lifestyle is the way each one of us approaches the pleasures and pressures of our world. It's how we handle day-to-day necessities, as well as how we react to a crisis.

Lifestyle includes your attitudes and habits. It shows up in the priorities you set and the way you balance responsibilities.

Certainly, lifestyle includes such things as diet and exercise. But lifestyle also involves attitudes, including how you respond to living with a lifelong disease.

In the pages that follow, we'll discuss some of the qualities that make up a healthy lifestyle. We will look at the many ways you can take and keep control of your diabetes and make your life with this disease more manageable and enjoyable.

What in the world is “normal”?

What was the first thing you thought when your doctor said that you had diabetes?

If you're like most people with diabetes, you felt different. You felt like you were no longer “normal.”

That's a common reaction. Because as you're making changes in your life, as you're working to adopt a healthier “lifestyle,” it's nearly impossible not to compare yourself with your family and friends who don't live with the disease.

True, you may not be able to do everything they can without paying a price. But that doesn't mean you're not normal.

Keep in mind that every human being lives with boundaries.

The person without diabetes may be able to grab and eat a chocolate chip cookie without thinking twice. But sooner or later, they'll run into their own food boundary and have to say “enough” - or suffer a stomach ache and weight gain.

Living a healthy lifestyle begins with coming to grips with your own boundaries, then learning to make them a natural and “normal” part of your everyday life.

WHICH TYPE ARE YOU?

There are two common forms of diabetes, called type 1 and type 2.

In people with type 1 diabetes, the pancreas produces no insulin. So injections of insulin must be used to convert food into energy.

In type 2 diabetes, the pancreas may make insulin, but the body's cells have trouble using it properly. Type 2 diabetes can respond to a variety of treatments, including lifestyle changes, oral medications and insulin.

Lifestyle and diet

Approach food with your mind wide open.

“Can you eat that?”

It's a question you'll probably hear a lot from people who know you have diabetes. And in a word, the answer is “yes.”

People with diabetes can eat the same kinds of foods, in moderation, as anyone in their family or their culture.

It's what happens after the food is eaten that's different.

For the person without diabetes, the body's pancreas swings into action, automatically providing the insulin needed to convert food into usable energy.

As a person with diabetes, things are not that automatic. You may produce some insulin, but not enough to do the job. Your body may be resistant to insulin or you may produce no insulin at all.

As a result, you will not be able to eat as much of some foods or eat them as often. That's why diet is a foundation of any healthy diabetes lifestyle.

The diet meal plan you and your health care team will work out is a blueprint that will allow you to turn the calories you consume into usable energy.

The plan takes into consideration your age, gender, occupation, weight goal, food preferences, physical activities and social needs.

The purpose of the plan is to balance your food intake, activity, and medication into a predictable, manageable package.

For some people, a change of diet may be the only diabetes management tool that's needed. Even the loss of just 15 pounds has been known to improve or even normalize blood sugar in some people with type 2 diabetes.

Many people who develop type 2 diabetes are often overweight. Losing weight can help maintain normal blood sugar levels and prevent heart and blood vessel diseases.

If you use insulin to manage your diabetes, you and your health care team will balance your caloric intake with your insulin dosage.

Your doctor, dietitian, diabetes educator or nutritionist can help you develop a diet meal plan that's right for you. It doesn't have to be boring or difficult to follow. In fact, there is no need for other members of your family to eat differently than you. After all, what's good for your health is probably also good for theirs.

Weight loss is best achieved gradually - a pound or two a week is sufficient. Extreme diets should never be attempted except under a doctor's supervision. Diabetes meal planning means choosing the right foods and eating them in the right amounts at regular intervals.

Eat Smart.

When you shop, cook or eat out, make healthy choices. Select foods that are low in fat; avoid fried foods, fatty meats, products packed in oil and foods prepared with creamy sauces or butter. Choose foods that are broiled, steamed, grilled or baked. Avoid those that are fried, sautéed or breaded.

Learn as much as you can about foods and good nutrition habits. You'll find you have more choices than you thought.

Finally, if you slip up, don't be discouraged. Everyone does occasionally. Just get back on the road to control at your next meal. A diet that's part of your lifestyle is a lifelong pursuit.

Lifestyle and activity

The power of positive energy.

Defining the proper active lifestyle for people with diabetes is easy: It's the one everyone with or without diabetes ought to be living.

Combined with a good diet meal plan, physical activity can help you stay in control of your diabetes. Not only does an active body burn sugar faster, but exercise also helps the body utilize insulin better - which helps reduce the amount of glucose in your blood.

In addition, regular activity has a number of overall health benefits for people with diabetes:

- It helps control your weight by burning off calories and fat. Make it part of your lifestyle, and you'll look better and feel better.
- Planned physical activity and exercise reduce risk factors for heart disease by helping to control fat and cholesterol levels and lowering blood pressure.
- Planned physical activity and exercise improve blood flow and blood pressure. That makes your heart and lungs stronger.
- The benefits of planned physical activity are long-lasting. An active lifestyle helps you feel better and handle stress better.

Getting started.

Every exercise program includes the warning, "Consult your doctor." If you're a person with diabetes, you'll want to pay special attention to those words.

Your activity level will impact nearly every aspect of your diabetes management program. Given the increase in exercise levels, your doctor may wish to decrease your prescribed insulin or oral medication or increase the amount of calories you're allotted.

EXERCISE TIPS

- Drink plenty of fluids before and during physical activity
- Stretch 5-10 minutes before your exercise routine
- Test your blood sugar before planned physical activity
- Don't continue exercising if you are short of breath, feel faint or experience pain
- Don't get discouraged
- Test your blood sugar after exercising

Slow and steady wins the race.

You don't have to be able to run a marathon to make physical activity a part of your healthy lifestyle.

On the contrary, starting slowly and staying with an exercise program let you make the activity a real part of your life.

Start with something simple. Stay aware of how you're feeling. If there's a chance of hypoglycemia, carry glucose tablets or gel with you. If you need to rest, do. Remember, this is for you. You have nothing to prove to the world. Advance as you're ready and as recommended by your doctor.

Choose an activity that you enjoy. But make sure it's something that you can participate in day after day, throughout the year.

Find an exercise partner. Ask your spouse or neighbor to go with you. Team up with someone in your support group to provide mutual motivation and encouragement.

Give it time. Stay with your planned physical activity program for at least six months. You'll be amazed the difference an active healthy lifestyle can make in your life.

80-120 mg/dL
Before meals

100-140 mg/dL
At bedtime

TRACKING YOUR PROGRESS

Diabetes requires knowing where you stand with the disease. Today, there are two commonly used tests that are often used to track blood sugar levels.

Daily home testing can be done with any number of available blood glucose monitors. For people with diabetes, a healthy range is usually considered between 80 and 120 mg/dL before meals, and between 100 and 140 mg/dL at bedtime.

Hemoglobin A_{1c} (HbA_{1c}), also called glycosylated hemoglobin, is a test used by doctors to get a more complete picture of your blood sugar control. This test measures the amount of sugar in your blood. HbA_{1c} measures control over a three-month period, and will most likely be performed at your doctor's office.

Lifestyle and stress

Don't worry. Be healthy.

As a person with diabetes, it's important to control stress.

Stress can be caused by any number of physical or emotional factors. But it takes its toll on your body. And it can send your glucose and the management of your diabetes out of control.

When you're presented with what your mind decides is a crisis situation, your body snaps into a defensive mode. You shift over to a "flight or fight" mentality. Adrenaline surges through your body.

When you find yourself under pressure, relax. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes if the situation allows. Decide if the pressure you're feeling is equal to the reality of the situation.

If the threat is real, decide what your next step will be. If you've overreacted, take a giant emotional step back. Give the situation the attention it deserves, but not one stressful moment more.

STRESS TIPS

When you realize that you're stressed out, try to take a "time out." Here are a few things you can do:

- Relax and take deep breaths for a few minutes
- Look for a humorous side to the situation
- Listen to music
- Take a warm bath

Lifestyle and maintenance

Watching out for your eyes, feet and teeth.

Diabetes affects more areas of your body than you might ever suspect. An important part of a healthy lifestyle is keeping these forgotten areas in mind during visits with your doctor.

EYES

Over time, high sugar levels in the blood can cause the small veins in the eye to rupture.

In fact, diabetes is the leading nonaccidental cause of blindness in the United States.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Today, doctors can diagnose and treat eye problems in ways that even a few years ago were not possible. Good control of your blood sugar can help prevent eye problems.

To protect your precious sight, make sure you visit your eye doctor at least once a year.

EYE TIPS

- Wear sunglasses on bright days
- Schedule regular visits with eye specialist
- Wear safety glasses if your eyes are at risk
- Don't share makeup

FEET

Consistently high sugar levels can cause a nerve-numbing condition called neuropathy. Neuropathy causes a loss of sensation, often marked by a tingling feeling, especially in the body's extremities.

Diabetes can cause the feet and other extremities to be deprived of the blood they need, resulting in amputation in extreme cases. Good control of blood sugar can help prevent these problems.

Your doctor can conduct a simple, pain-free monofilament test of neuropathy in connection with your diabetes.

FEET TIPS

- Inspect your feet daily for sores, calluses, cuts, swelling and blisters
- Cut toenails straight across and file edges
- Wash feet daily and dry them carefully
- Don't walk barefoot
- Don't use perfumed lotions
- Don't wear shoes without socks

TEETH

Even your teeth aren't free from the effects of unmanaged diabetes.

Since healthy teeth are so dependent on good circulation, your mouth can easily be affected by sugar levels that are too high.

Be sure to see your dentist regularly. And let him or her know that you have diabetes.

ORAL HYGIENE TIPS

- Have your teeth cleaned and checked every six months
- Floss your teeth at least once a day

- Eat before you go to the dentist. The best time for dental work is when your blood sugar level is in a normal range

BETTER LIFESTYLE, BETTER LIFE

Keeping your diabetes under control will require a lot of work. It'll mean dropping old habits and picking up new ones. It may seem overwhelming at times. But with knowledge, support from others and a realistic outlook, you can take control of diabetes.

The results you reach can let you live a life you may have thought was gone forever. You can look better, feel better, live longer and live better.

Ways to take control of diabetes

- Work toward keeping your blood sugar and HbA_{1c} in the range your doctor recommends
- Increase physical activity
- Enjoy a healthy diet
- Don't forget your medication
- Work with a diabetes educator
- Have regular visits with your health care team
- Test your blood sugar regularly
- Visit www.DiabetesWATCH.com

Emergency instructions

LOW BLOOD SUGAR

(hypoglycemia or insulin reaction)

SYMPTOMS:

- Sudden onset of symptoms
- Poor coordination – difficulty maintaining balance
- Angry, moody temper
- Pale skin coloration
- Confusion and/or disorientation
- Sudden hunger
- Unnatural sweating
- Trembling
- May result in unconsciousness

ACTIONS:

Eat high-sugar foods, such as soda, candy, milk or fruit juice

DO NOT drink diet drinks

If not better in 15 minutes, call your health care provider

HIGH BLOOD SUGAR

(hyperglycemia or acidosis)

SYMPTOMS:

- Gradual onset of symptoms
- Sleepiness
- Excessive thirst
- Frequent urination
- Flushed skin color
- Nausea, vomiting
- Fruity or winelike-smelling breath
- Heavy breathing
- May result in unconsciousness

ACTIONS:

If you're not sure whether it's high or low blood sugar, give sugar-containing food or drink

If not better in 15 minutes, call your health care provider

DiabetesWATCH™

DiabetesWATCH™ is a unique and innovative on-line community designed to promote the awareness and understanding of diabetes, and help people with diabetes live healthier lives.

www.DiabetesWATCH.com

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™

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Aventis Pharmaceuticals has been at the forefront of diabetes research for decades. In addition to our extensive research and development efforts, Aventis Pharmaceuticals supports people with diabetes and their families in many different ways, including sponsorship of diabetes organizations and development of diabetes educational materials and programs.



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