

Diabetes & exercise

Why is exercise important?

Regular exercise is important for everyone including people with diabetes. People with either type 1 or type 2 will benefit. Special precautions are needed if you have type 1 diabetes and are doing strenuous prolonged exercise. Seek advice from your specialist or diabetes educator.

Exercise helps your insulin work better

A major factor in type 2 diabetes is a poor response of the body to insulin. It has now been clearly shown that regular physical activity can improve the body's response to insulin. Studies also show that people with an active lifestyle halve their chances of developing type 2 diabetes.

Exercise helps control blood glucose

Regular physical activity helps control overall blood glucose by helping the body to use the glucose better. Exercise also assists in reducing weight.

Exercise improves muscle tone and heart function

Circulation and lung capacity improve. Exercise can help in lowering your blood fats and helps control 'bad' cholesterol so you are less likely to have blood vessel disease (eg heart attack or stroke).

Exercise improves your sense of well being

Many people find that exercise relieves tension and stress, and that they have a more positive attitude to life.

Exercise helps lower your blood pressure

The reduction of stress, blood fats and improvement in heart function can also lower blood pressure.

How much exercise?

A suggested ideal is 30 minutes of moderate exercise. You can break up into 10 minute sessions 3 times a day. Although any increase in activity will have some beneficial effects, aim for at least 5 days a week. Moderate physical activity means exercise that is strenuous enough to make you puff a bit.

What kind of exercise?

You can make up some of your exercise simply by changing your lifestyle. Get off the bus a stop early. Use the stairs instead of the lift or elevator when you're only going up a few floors. Take brisk, regular walks or use your bicycle whenever you can, to the shops, deli or church.

There are a wide variety of sport and exercise activities available. Choose one that you will enjoy and want to continue. Walking, golf, croquet, bowls, tennis, swimming, dancing and cycling are among those that are safe and readily accessible to most people.

Aerobics is another good way of exercising. It is helpful to consult an instructor to find a level to suit you and then build up gradually.



Footwear and foot care

It is especially important for people with diabetes to wear comfortable, well fitting shoes. Shoes and socks should 'breathe' so wear woollen or cotton socks and preferably leather shoes – if synthetic make sure there are air holes. See the leaflet 'Diabetes & Footcare' in this same series for more information about footcare.

If your feet are at risk of problems examine them regularly and if there is any redness, swelling or sore spots see your doctor, diabetes educator or podiatrist.

Managing diabetes during exercise

Because each person's response to exercise is different it is important to determine your own response and to work out your own way of varying your intake of food, insulin or tablets. Your doctor, diabetes educator or dietitian will be able to assist you if necessary.

Blood Glucose

Depending on what type of diabetes you have, your treatment and the intensity of the physical activity, you may need to adjust your food and / or medication. With normal activity such as walking, light swimming etc it is unlikely changes will need to be made. However, if your activity is for a long duration or at an intensive level eg. bush walking or squash, then adjustments may be needed. Discuss an action plan with your diabetes educator. Always carry your blood glucose meter and quick acting glucose if you are at risk of low blood glucose.

Ketones

People with type 1 diabetes may need to check ketones if the blood glucose level is over 15mmol/L. If ketones are moderate to high you are advised **not to exercise** until your blood glucose has returned to a safer level. You may need to consult your doctor or diabetes educator.

Important precautions

Health check – before starting an exercise program have a check up with your doctor.

Wear your medical identification.

Getting started – warm up before exercise. Start slowly and set a pace that is right for you.

Check blood glucose levels before exercise. If you are at risk of hypos you may need to test before, during and after exercise.



Caution

Low blood glucose levels – the responses to low blood glucose levels such as sweating and palpitations, may be confused with the response to exercise. Take steps to avoid low blood glucose levels and always carry extra glucose (eg jelly beans) in your pocket to take if you notice warning symptoms. (see the leaflet ‘Troubleshooting’ in this same series).

Retinopathy – if you have retinopathy you may need to avoid strenuous exercise until your eye specialist indicates that your condition is stable.

neuropathy – if you have lost sensation in your feet you should talk to your doctor or diabetes educator about what exercise is safest for you to do.



Points to remember

- > Exercise can have positive benefits for diabetes and general health.
- > Wear suitable footwear.
- > If you are at risk of low blood glucose be prepared and have an action plan.
- > Have an action plan for strenuous or prolonged exercise.
- > If you have type 1 diabetes, monitor ketones if BGL is over 15mmol/L, and don't exercise strenuously if moderate or higher.
- > Wear medical alerting identification.

For more information

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