

Tips for Supporting Your Family Member or Friend With Diabetes

Diabetes is a chronic (long-term) condition that requires numerous lifestyle changes for proper control and a healthy life. Lifestyle changes are probably the most difficult for any of us to make. They were formed over a lifetime and generally are not changed easily, even if we've been diagnosed with diabetes or told by our doctor that they should be changed. As a family member or friend of someone with diabetes, you can help make these changes easier. Here are just a few of the many ways you can help:

Coping With Diabetes

Caring for diabetes puts extra stress on one's lifestyle and may cause one to feel anger, fear, sadness, or depression. Encourage your family member or friend to share his/her feelings about diabetes with you, his/her health care team, or a support group.

Learn About Diabetes

Show your loved one that you care by learning about diabetes.

- Attend medical appointments and educational sessions together.
- Learn about diabetes and how it is cared for.
- Learn how to handle sick days, including giving insulin and glucagon injections (if needed) and monitoring blood sugar.

Diabetes Meal Plans

Making changes in how one eats is probably one of the most difficult behavioral changes. You can help by learning about your family member's meal plan, encouraging him/her to stick with it (without nagging or becoming the food police), by eating the same foods, and by avoiding foods that are not healthy for your loved one. The meal plan for a person with diabetes is healthy and can be prepared for the entire family.

Physical Activity

Physical activity goes hand in hand with nutrition and weight loss. Many people with type 2 diabetes need to lose weight. Physical activity not only helps with weight loss, but also helps with blood sugar control. You can support your loved one by offering to exercise together and by making sure he/she has good, supportive, comfortable, and well-fitting shoes for exercising; keeps a source of fast-acting sugar with him/her when exercising; and tests his/her blood sugar as recommended by his/her health care team. If you notice signs of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), encourage him/her to test his/her blood sugar and, if low, eat a source of sugar.

Blood Glucose Monitoring

Blood glucose (sugar) monitoring tells us how food, exercise, medicine, and stress affect one's blood sugar levels. Learn how to use the blood glucose monitor so that in an emergency (or in the case of illness) you can test your loved one's blood sugar. Encourage your loved one to test his/her blood sugar as recommended by his/her health care team, to record the blood glucose levels, and to take them to diabetes health care appointments.

Daily Foot Checks

Diabetes can cause nerve damage in the feet, which can reduce one's ability to feel pain. Thus, persons with diabetes may injure their feet and not know it for some time, resulting in serious foot infections. If your loved one cannot see his/her feet to inspect them himself or herself, do it for him/her. Look for red spots, wounds, and other changes. While you're at it, a foot massage might be nice too!

Health Care Checkups

Diabetes can affect many systems and organs of the body. Thus, regular health care checkups are needed. Encourage your family member to see his/her health care provider to get appropriate exams and tests as follows:

- Two to four times each year, see a doctor for diabetes checkups (blood pressure, A1C test, foot check, and review of blood sugar records).
- At least once a year, get a fasting lipid (blood fat) profile and a microalbumin (protein in urine) test.
- At least once a every other year, see an eye doctor for a dilated eye exam if your at low risk for diabetic eye disease and every year if you are at increased risk.
- At least two times a year, get a dental exam.

Diabetes can be a difficult and time-consuming disease to manage. But with the help and support of a caring family and friends, the needed lifestyle changes can be made, and the person with diabetes can live a healthy life. In addition, others may benefit from changes in diet and activity.