

Managing Diabetes: Six Healthy Steps with the Most Benefit

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Want to boost your overall health with diabetes? A Johns Hopkins expert offers healthy strategies to help you control your blood sugar, protect your heart, and more.

Woman on a bike takes a sip of her water bottle while biking through a wooded area.

Research Shows

Classes Help Improve Blood Sugar Levels

Want more information, support, and advice about practical, everyday ways to stay healthy with diabetes? Ask your doctor about a diabetes self-management class near you. In a 2011 study from The Johns Hopkins University, people who took diabetes-education classes saw their A1C reduced by a significant 0.72 percent.

About 17.7 million Americans with diabetes take medications—pills, injections, or both—to help keep their blood sugar within a healthy range, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's important, and it's important to take medication as prescribed, but don't stop there. People with diabetes are two to four times more likely to have heart disease or a stroke than those without this chronic condition, according to the American Heart Association.

"It's very important to take care of your heart health too," says Johns Hopkins diabetes expert Rita Rastogi Kalyani, M.D., M.H.S. "Making smart choices every day can help."

Kalyani recommends starting with these six critical steps today.

Extra pounds? Lose a little. You don't have to be a "biggest loser" or get an "extreme makeover" to enjoy big weight-loss benefits if you have diabetes. In a nationwide study of 5,145 people with type 2 diabetes, those who shed just 5 to 10 percent of their weight (for someone weighing 175 pounds, that's a loss of 9 to 17.5 pounds) were three times more likely to lower their A1C (a test of long-term blood sugar control) by 0.5 percent, a significant drop. They were also 50 percent more likely to lower their blood pressure by 5 points and twice as likely to lower their triglycerides by 40 points compared with those whose weight remained the same.

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Having type 2 diabetes can affect not only your physical health but also your emotional health. Getting a diagnosis of diabetes adds an emotional weight onto your shoulders which can be challenging to carry day in and day out. Sometimes this weight can come out as other conditions such as anxiety or depression.

There are multiple studies that have shown that external stressors, such as feelings of anxiety or depression, can lead to difficulties in managing self-care. Decreased physical activity, bad food choices, not regularly taking medication are some examples of poor self-care management. Anxiety and stress can lead one to taking up bad habits such as smoking or drinking excessively, which can put a person with diabetes at more risk for developing diabetes related complications.

The Grief of Diagnosis

When you are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, you may notice that you start to experience a grieving process. Many people experience the same emotions associated with the loss of a loved one. When you consider the diagnosis of diabetes, it changes your life, you have lost something and you've lost your normal carefree life that you had before.

These common emotions are explained in more detail below as well as various the ways you can learn to control these emotions or even overcome them.

Common Emotions of Diabetes

Diabetes is a chronic condition that requires diligent almost 24/7 management. Sometimes this type of schedule can seem like a burden. When this happens, other common emotions or conditions may manifest, causing even more difficulty in managing your blood sugar levels.

Stress

Stress is one of the most common emotions associated with having type 2 diabetes. Just the constant daily regimen of testing, ensuring you're taking your medications and monitoring your food intake, may seem like a full time job in itself. Add to this routine, a career, a family, and other typical life activities, and stress is almost inevitable. The problem with stress, in addition to the emotional weight it places on you, is that it can also affect your blood sugar levels as well. Stress is known to cause a rise and also a fluctuation in blood sugar levels which can make it more difficult to stay within your target range.

What Can You Do?

While you cannot get rid of stress completely, you can effectively learn how to manage it so that it doesn't cause even more damage to your diabetes management efforts. If your stress seems to be surrounding the challenge of diabetes management, there are a few things you can do to help reduce this stress.

Establish Clear Goals

Keep Regularly Scheduled Appointments

Set Reminders for Medication

Ask for Help

Working to get to the root cause can help you to feel like yourself again.

Denial

Denial can be a dangerous emotion to deal with when it comes to diabetes. This is because potentially denying that you suffer from type 2 diabetes and not adhering to your regimen including medications can be life threatening.

What Can You Do?

Learning how to confront the feelings of denial such as fear, guilt, anger and frustration can be very beneficial in your overall management. Keeping these feelings inside and not tackling them head on can seem like a short-term fix, but the long term consequences can keep you in an endless feeling of being stuck and unable to do anything about it.

Talking to someone that understands first hand about diabetes denial can really give you a sense of freedom that you never have experienced before. One of the biggest factors to being successful with your diabetes management is to have a network of people who you can lean on or a close support system that understands what you have to live with each day. You can seek therapy and/or join in-person or online networking groups available to people with diabetes

Say yes to fiber-rich foods. When people with diabetes increase the fiber in their diet, they can potentially lower blood glucose over a period of 12 weeks or less, according to a major review of 15 studies. Most people—with or without diabetes—don't get the recommended 21 to 38 grams of fiber daily. (The American Diabetes Association suggests that diabetics should aim for 14 grams of fiber for every 1,000 calories consumed in a day.) Those who participated in these studies increased their intake by an average of 18 grams a day—the amount in a bowl of higher-fiber breakfast cereal plus a couple of extra servings of vegetables. Whenever you can, choose vegetables, whole grains, and fruit over sugary treats and bread, rolls, and other foods made with refined grains.

Get moving. Starting a regular exercise routine can help people with diabetes lower their A1C by an average of 0.3 to 0.6 percentage points. "Aim for 30 minutes of aerobic exercise—such as walking, riding an exercise bike, or swimming—at least five days a week," Kalyani suggests. Add two to three light strength-training sessions a week and you'll build muscle, which uses blood sugar for fuel. In one notable study of 251 people with diabetes, those who participated in aerobic exercise and strength-training every week for nearly six months saw their A1C fall by nearly 1 percent—a drop big enough to reduce risk for diabetes-related microvascular complications by a substantial 35 percent.

Know your ABCs—and beyond. “Because your risk for heart disease is higher with diabetes, it’s smart to see your doctor regularly for checks,” Kalyani says. Have your:

A1C tested as often as your doctor recommends

Blood pressure checked at every visit

Cholesterol tested once a year

In addition, your doctor should check your feet at every visit. You also need an annual eye exam and a yearly kidney-function and urine microalbumin test. Have an annual flu shot and stay up-to-date with your pneumonia vaccine too, Kalyani recommends. And in general, “Talk with your doctor about what you need,” she says.

Monitor blood sugar at home too. Be sure to check your blood sugar levels as often as your doctor recommends. Testing blood glucose at home can give you and your doctor a better idea of how well your medications are working as well as their side effects and other risks, and how your diet and exercise habits are affecting your blood sugar levels, Kalyani says. Of course, more isn’t always better; some people with diabetes can safely be tested every six months without monitoring at home, so talk with your doctor about what’s right for you.