

Exercise and Diabetes

Why should I exercise?

Exercise can improve your body image and self-esteem. It can also help to control your body weight. If you have insulin-dependent diabetes (type I diabetes), regular exercise can also help control your diabetes by lowering your glucose level (blood sugar). Finally, people who have diabetes have a higher risk of heart attack. By participating in regular exercise, you can lower your risk of heart disease.

Is exercise risky for people with diabetes?

The benefits of regular exercise usually far outweigh the risks for people with diabetes. However, if you are planning an exercise program, you should take extra precautions because exercise changes the way your body reacts to insulin. Talk with your doctor first about the kind of exercise you want to do. Your doctor can help you figure out what your glucose level should be before you exercise each day.

Regular exercise makes your body more sensitive to insulin. For this reason, your regular dose of insulin may cause your glucose level to become too low. You may need to take less insulin or increase the amount of food you eat. If you're exercising, you and your doctor will need to decide how much insulin you need.

To help your doctor do this, keep track of the amount of insulin you take and what time you take it. Also, keep track of which part of your body gets the shot of insulin. Write down what kind of food, how much food and what time you eat each day. Finally, keep track of the time you spend exercising and the difficulty of the exercise. Check your glucose level before and after every meal, and before and after exercising.

Do I still need to monitor my glucose level?

Yes. You should monitor your glucose level before, during and after exercise. If your glucose level is too low or too high right before you plan to exercise, it's better to wait until the level improves. Talk with your doctor to find out what the best glucose level is for you.

Do I need to change my diet?

Your doctor or nutritionist may suggest that you eat foods that are mostly complex carbohydrates (pasta, breads, beans) and avoid foods that are high in fat and refined sugar (cookies, cakes, candy). Depending on whether you need to adjust your dose of insulin, your doctor may suggest that you eat foods high in carbohydrates before and during exercise. Also, depending on what you eat before you exercise, you may need to adjust the amount of insulin you take.

Do I need to drink more fluids than usual?

Yes. When you're exercising, your body doesn't notice as quickly that you need more fluid. Also, your body uses more fluid to keep you cool. By the time you feel thirsty, you may already be getting dehydrated. You should drink lots of fluid before, during and after exercise. Plain water is usually all you will need if you're exercising for less than one hour. If you're exercising for longer periods of time, such as in a softball or basketball game, your doctor may suggest that you drink a sports drink, such as Gatorade or All Sport.

Are there other precautions I should take?

Exercising in higher temperatures increases the amount of insulin that your body absorbs and lowers your glucose level. If you exercise outside when the weather is warm, you may need to take less insulin.

Also, if you exercise late in the afternoon or evening, your insulin routine may need to be adjusted. However, everyone's body is different, so it's best to talk with your doctor before you change the type of insulin you take and when you take it.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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