

Physical activity

and type 2 diabetes

Now that you have diabetes, you're probably hearing from everyone just how important it is to 'get some exercise'. While you may be thinking 'that's easier said than done', you may be surprised to learn that exercising isn't about 'no pain-no gain'. Regular physical activity can become an enjoyable part of your day with long-term benefits to your diabetes and your overall health.

Why do it?

Regular physical activity benefits everyone in many ways, particularly those people who have diabetes (see below). Having regular physical activity and not smoking are both very important to the health of people with diabetes.

Many people find it quite difficult to start an activity program, especially those who have never been active or have other health problems. We can all find excuses not to be more active. However, when we think about the positives, it's certainly worth the effort, whether or not we have diabetes.

For the person with diabetes, physical activity helps to:

- Improve the body's response to insulin, which can lower blood glucose levels.
- Lower blood pressure and improve cholesterol, which reduces the risk of heart disease.
- Control weight.

Other positives include:

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| • Reduced stress and tension | • Increased energy levels |
| • Improved sleep | • Stronger bones |
| • Improved mental outlook | |

How much is enough?

It is recommended that you aim to spend a total of at least 30 minutes on most (if not all) days of the week doing some form of 'moderate-intensity' physical activity.

'Moderate intensity' physical activity means you will notice your breathing and heart rate speeding up and perhaps a light sweat. However you should still be able to talk. If you're not breathing faster than usual, it's not really helping. If on the other hand, you're gasping and unable to talk, then the activity is too strenuous.

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The key here is to 'add up': three 10 minute sessions still equals 30 minutes. Look for ways to increase your activity in all your day to day activities. It all adds up over time.

If you're trying to lose weight, 30 minutes may not be enough. It depends on how active you are already and other things such as the food you eat. Best to talk to your doctor or dietitian.

What sort of activities are recommended?

Basically anything that gets you moving more and you actually enjoy doing! However, not everyone finds activity enjoyable. It is more important to do something rather than letting the fact that you don't enjoy it become an excuse not to be active.

Here's some ideas:

- Walking is easy, cheap and doesn't take any special skill – just a good pair of walking shoes – plus you can change the pace and distance as you get fitter.
- Be creative and try something different! How about ballroom dancing, water aerobics, Tai Chi or water walking? Check with your local library or community centre to see if there are any free programs in your area.
- Stand and move while on the phone or in a queue.
- Consider buying a pedometer (step counter) and count your daily steps, aiming to increase to a level you and your doctor may decide.
- Think about all the things you do using a machine or gadget. Could you do them in a more active way?

What should I do before starting an activity program?

Diabetes can put you at risk of certain conditions that could be affected by physical activity. This check list will help you to take on an activity program with safety.

- Be sure to check with your doctor before starting any new activity program. The doctor will consider your blood glucose levels, any diabetes related complications and the condition of your heart and blood vessels.
- Your doctor may advise you to have a stress test as a precaution if you:
 - are over 35
 - have had type 2 diabetes for more than 10 years
 - have high blood pressure
 - have had heart problems
- As most physical activity involves using your feet, consider seeing a podiatrist before you start your program for advice on suitable footwear.

Any tips for when I'm actually taking my physical activity?

- Each time you set out on your activity session, make a mental commitment: “This is forever”. Believe that physical activity is as vital to your health as the air you breathe.
- It often helps to stay committed by doing your activity sessions with a friend or family member or as part of a regular group.
- Aim to do your activity sessions at regular times and on set days.
- Wear good quality, well fitting, closed-in footwear as recommended by your podiatrist.
- Start slowly and gradually increase the pace and length of time of each session. Don't push yourself so you develop sore muscles or blisters on your feet.
- Stop and rest if you experience chest, abdominal, neck or arm pain, or tightness or even vague discomfort. Stop and rest if you feel breathless, faint or lightheaded or have any other unusual symptoms while exercising.

These symptoms could mean heart trouble that requires urgent treatment. If these symptoms – any symptoms – do not settle within 10 minutes, you or someone with you MUST call an ambulance to take you to the nearest hospital emergency department immediately.

If the symptoms settle in less than 10 minutes, you should go to your doctor as soon as possible for a checkup. This must be done before you do more exercise.

- If you experience leg pain, stop until the pain goes away then resume your activity. Tell your doctor about the leg pain if you have not already done so. Gradually you should be able to exercise longer without getting leg pain, but sometimes treatment is required.
- If you are on diabetes tablets or insulin, always carry quickly absorbed glucose such as jellybeans or glucose tablets in case your blood glucose level drops too low. For more information refer to the *Hypoglycaemia and Diabetes* information sheet.
- Wear sunscreen and layer your clothing so you can add or remove clothes as needed.
- Don't get dehydrated. Drink enough water to avoid thirst and remember you will need a bit more than usual.
- Take short breaks along the way if doing physical activity for long periods.
- Wear diabetes identification (eg: Medic Alert®).
- Do not exercise when you are unwell.

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Is there anything I need to do after my activity sessions?

- Check your feet at least once a day, looking for signs of wear and tear such as redness, blisters or cracks. If your feet perspire, change your socks after activity.
- For your first couple of sessions it's a good idea to test your blood glucose level before, during and afterwards, especially if you're on diabetes tablets or insulin. By doing this you will soon learn about how your body responds to activity.

Physical activity can lower your blood glucose level for up to 48 hours. You might notice a temporary rise in your blood glucose level after activity. This rise varies between individuals and is due to the release of hormones during periods of intense muscle activity.

- Set yourself goals such as walking 30 minutes every day for a week, and reward yourself with a movie, a new walking shirt or a low fat latte when you reach your goals.

Why do I need to know how my body responds to activity?

It is important to know your own blood glucose response to activity as everybody reacts differently.

Many of the early signs of a low blood glucose level (eg: sweating, feeling faint and weakness) are also feelings you may have during physical activity and can therefore go unnoticed.

It may be necessary for adjustments to be made to your medication, insulin or eating plan based on your blood glucose level. Your diabetes educator, dietitian and doctor can assist you.

If you have questions or concerns about any activity program, talk to your doctor, diabetes educator or contact Diabetes Australia on 1300 136 588.

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The contents of this information sheet have been provided by Diabetes Australia and produced with the support of an unconditional grant from Alphapharm. It was reviewed by Diabetes Australia's Health Care & Education Committee (HCEC) in November 2005 and is endorsed for publication until November 2007. Do not distribute after this date.

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