diabetes australia

FACT SHEET:

Gestational diabetes
Starting insulin

What does insulin do?

- Insulin is made by your pancreas, and is in the background at all times helping your body's metabolism.
- More insulin is released into the blood when you eat to help the body use the food.
- Insulin and glucose travel through the blood to muscle cells.
- Insulin is like the key to the door. It helps glucose pass into the muscle cells

Why do women need to make more insulin in pregnancy?

- Some women come into pregnancy with slightly high glucose levels: not high enough to affect their bodies, but high enough to affect the growing baby.
- Other women are OK early in pregnancy but don't make enough insulin later on in the pregnancy because of increasing hormones from the placenta. This will make the blood glucose higher especially around 28 weeks of pregnancy.
- Your baby will also make more insulin to manage the higher glucose levels.
- If your body can't make enough extra insulin, you may need to inject it. This insulin is the same as what your body makes naturally.
- It will not harm your baby.
- Women who start pregnancy with high glucose levels are at a much higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes later in life.

Insulin injections

Insulin injections help to keep blood glucose levels normal and avoid problems for you and your baby.

Types of insulin

Your blood glucose record will help your doctor decide which type of insulin you need. There are 2 types:

- Long-acting (background) insulin
- Quick-acting (mealtime) insulin

You need to keep checking your blood glucose levels so the insulin can be changed as your pregnancy goes on. See your health team regularly.

How do I give myself the insulin injection?

- Your clinic nurse, health worker or diabetes educator will teach you to inject yourself.
- Starting with a small dose, and increased gradually. Your health team will tell you the correct dose and what your blood glucose levels should be.
- You will use an insulin pen. The insulin is injected into the soft skin on your tummy or top of your leg. You need to put the needle into a different place each time - at least 2 cms (2 fingers wide) from the last injection site.

How to take care of your insulin

- Don't let it get too hot.
- Store spare insulin in the fridge.
- Never freeze insulin.
- Always check the expiry date before you use any new insulin.
- Insulin in the pen will be OK out of the fridge for 4 weeks. After that, throw it away.
- Keep monitor, lancets, pens out of reach of children!

Disposal of needles

Used sharp needles and lancets need to be put into a yellow sharps container. More information can be found at diabetesaustralia.com.au/resources/safe-sharps

Hypoglycaemia

Low blood glucose level also known as "hypos". Symptoms include:

- Weakness, trembling or shaking
- Sweating
- Light headedness/headache
- Lack of concentration
- Behaviour change
- Dizziness
- Tearfulness/crying
- Irritability
- Numbness around the lips/fingers
- Hunger

Hypos can be serious. If you don't treat a hypo, you can pass out or become unconscious. Check your blood glucose level if you think it is too low.

Preventing hypos

- Have some carbohydrate food at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.
- Don't skip meals. If you do miss a meal, don't take the meal-time insulin.
- Carry extra carbohydrate food (muesli bar or fruit).
- Take the right amount of insulin.
- Avoid alcohol. Alcohol can also harm the baby's brain.

How to treat a hypo

If your blood glucose level is 4 or less, first have some fast-acting carbohydrates to quickly raise your blood glucose. Some options include:

- A small glass of soft drink, sports drink, or cordial (not diet)
- Half a glass of fruit juice
- 6 to 10 jellybeans
- 3 teaspoons of sugar or honey mixed into a glass of water

Wait 15 minutes. If you still feel the same, or your blood glucose level is still below 4, have one more of the fast-acting carbohydrates listed above. THEN have a meal if it is time, or a snack:

- Fruit
- Bread
- A glass of milk

Always carry:

- Some hypo treatment (jelly beans or sugary drink).
- Some extra carbohydrate snacks.

Insulin and physical activity

Heavy physical activity is not recommended in pregnancy.

Your blood glucose levels can get too low if you exercise for a long time with no carbohydrate snack.

You should always carry some carbohydrate foods with you when you are exercising.

Your questions answered

Have I failed if I end up having to take insulin?

Absolutely not. The need for insulin is related to how much insulin your body is able to make and whether this is enough to process the amount of carbohydrate food you and your baby need to stay well. In most cases it is not a reflection of the effort you are making with your diet.

Is the insulin going to harm my baby?

Insulin will not harm your baby but high glucose levels may. Insulin is used because it only crosses the placenta in very small amounts. This makes it a very safe way to reduce your blood glucose levels if healthy foods and regular exercise aren't working well enough on their own.

Are there any long-term effects?

No. Taking injected insulin is just increasing the insulin circulating in your body on top of what your pancreas is already making.

Where do I inject the insulin?

Insulin is injected into your belly region. This is the preferred area as there is good fat coverage (even if you are slim) and it is not an area subject to a variation in blood flow. Many women worry about the needle hurting the baby but the needle does not go anywhere near your baby – even towards the end of a pregnancy when you can feel a foot or an elbow. The most commonly used needle is 4mm.

Does taking insulin increase the chance of my baby having diabetes?

Taking insulin is not related to your baby's risk of developing diabetes. However, the fact that you've developed GDM means you are at risk of developing type 2 diabetes in the future, and studies do show that if you need insulin while pregnant you are more likely to develop impaired glucose tolerance. This is not due to using insulin but rather the other way around i.e. there is more disturbance to your glucose levels hence you need insulin in the first place.

Where do I get my insulin and How much does it cost?

You will register with the National Diabetes Services Scheme (NDSS) when you are diagnosed with gestational diabetes. This allows you to access a subsidised cost for your test strips. If insulin is required your registration will be upgraded to state you need insulin. You can then access the supplies you need from a chemist.

What do i need to know about storing insulin?

Insulin is kept refrigerated until you start using it. Once you start using a new pen of insulin you can keep it at room temperature. Any unused pen devices can stay in the fridge until you start them. Don't keep insulin in hot places such as the car or in direct sunlight.

If I'm taking insulin can I go back to eating what I want, when I want?

If only! Insulin is an additional therapy on top of your diet and exercise. Unfortunately the placental hormones make it difficult to eat freely and merely match your insulin dose to your carbohydrate intake. Keeping a consistent carbohydrate intake and activity level makes your diabetes easier to manage.

Acknowledgement of Country

Diabetes Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this Country. We pay the utmost respect to them, their cultures and to their Elders, past and present. We extend that respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today. Diabetes Australia is committed to improving health outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people affected by diabetes and those at risk.

About the artwork: *A Pathway to Health*

By starting this journey together, we can move towards healthier communities for future generations and take control of our family's health. By yarning and understanding diabetes together, we are strong and can get through this together. This painting was created for Diabetes Australia by artist Keisha Leon (Thomason), an Aboriginal Graphic Designer and Artist. Keisha is a proud Waanyi-Kalkadoon (Mount Isa, Queensland) and Chinese woman.

This information is intended as a guide only. It should not replace individual medical advice and if you have any concerns about your health or further questions, you should contact your health professional.

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Yulu-Burri-Ba Aboriginal Corporation for Community Health

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