

# Does Diabetes Get Easier with Time?

## Reflections After 33 Years



Miriam E. Tucker

I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 1973, at age 9, at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. After more than three decades, some aspects of life with diabetes are pretty easy for me. Others, while not always easy, are at least routine. Then there's the stuff that remains downright difficult. Which things are which? You might be surprised.

Acceptance of the diagnosis, so difficult in the beginning, isn't even an issue for me any more. I've got diabetes all right — my days of denial are long past. With that comes the knowledge that if I don't take care of it, the consequences will be mine to bear. But on the flip side, when I do well I deserve the credit!

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I use two different insulin pens, one containing Levemir and the other with Novolog. They make it simple to just point and shoot. I inject each one separately in the morning, Novolog before lunch and before dinner, and Levemir again before bed. If I'm snacking or my sugar's high, I'll take more Novolog. I've chosen to manage my diabetes this way instead of wearing a pump — just my personal preference.

People often ask how many shots I take a day. I always have to stop and count, because I don't keep track. For me, that's kind of like asking how many times a day do you go to the bathroom. You have to stop and count, right? It's not something you would normally add up!

But it is fun to watch people's jaws drop as I start counting aloud on the fingers of one hand, then the other. Or the way they stare in awe while watching me inject. If they stay silent, I'll just let

them think I'm Superwoman. But sometimes they'll say, "Oh my God, I could never do that!" Then I smile and reply, "Sure you could."

So that's the simple stuff. Two other very important aspects of diabetes management are not always easy but they are routine: diet and exercise. The secret: I don't think of them as "diet" and "exercise." They're just everyday aspects of my life.

I don't work out at a gym. Instead, I walk. But while I'm walking, I'm also accomplishing things: doing errands, talking on my cell phone, "writing" articles in my head, jotting notes down with a pen and paper. At work, I eat lunch at my desk and then walk during my actual lunch hour.

Whenever I can, I fit walking in. If I'm going downtown, I'll walk the six blocks from my home to the subway. If possible, I'll get off a stop before my destination and walk the rest of the way. Not only am I doing my body good by walking, but I'm protecting the environment by not driving, and I'm saving money on gas and extra subway fare. It's win-win-win!

Lately, I've started stair-climbing too. I take the steps instead of the elevator at work, and walk up escalators while they're moving.

Stair-climbing is still tough. Before I start, I take a deep breath and try to think of a song or a pleasant thought to "carry" me up — anything to distract myself from the lead weights that are my legs. But happily, I think to myself, next time I get to go DOWN! I look at steps as great opportunity: How could I not take advantage of it?

As for food, I'm lucky that my whole family adopted healthy eating habits after my diagnosis, so I've grown up with that mindset. I automatically avoid the double carb/fat whammies like pizza, French fries, potato salad, stuff that's cooked in cream sauce, or anything that's breaded or deep-fried.

I do indulge in occasional desserts, though: I don't believe in deprivation! But, once I've decided I simply MUST have that piece of cake or pie, my

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mind immediately jumps to decision #2: How will I compensate? Take an extra shot of insulin? A walk after dinner? Both? I know I can't simply eat the dessert without thinking about it. That's just the reality of diabetes.

Portion size is a big issue for me. I have a large appetite, and I'm a stress-eater to boot. Thankfully, I've discovered a secret weapon that allows me to fill up without damaging my diabetes (or weight) control: Veggies! I love them all: broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, mushrooms, eggplant, spinach, kale, peppers, even Brussels sprouts!

In the evening, I'll often chop up a whole bunch of different healthy veggies — heavy on the green leafy ones, less of the higher-sugar ones like carrots and tomatoes — and cook them in a steamer for six to 10 minutes. Then I mix in a can of tuna or chopped chicken (no skin), pour on some fat-free salad dressing, and voila! To me, that's not deprivation or "dieting." It's dinner!

At salad bars, I'll pile my plate high with the plain salad greens, then place on top small amounts of other stuff, carefully selected on the basis of lower carb and fat content. If those items contain their own sauces or dressings, I don't add extra salad dressing. I'll head back to the dinner table with a plate piled far higher than those of my dining companions. But, unlike much of what's on their plates, mine's full of diabetes-friendly food that won't come back to bite me.

Of course, these healthy habits haven't all been with me from day one. Rather, I've adopted them slowly over time, weaving them into the fabric of my life so that they feel comfortable and not like punishment. I doubt I could have done it any other way.

So, after 33 years, what's still difficult about managing diabetes? Managing the diabetes! Although my control is reasonably good — and much better than it was when I was younger — both my doctor and I would like it to be better. Keeping those sugars in the normal range is still a constant struggle, even now.

People often ask if I can tell what my sugar level is "by the way I feel." Sure, I'll answer, except I'm wrong at least half the time. I do know when I'm at the extremes. If my sugar's over 300, I feel thirsty, sleepy, and sometimes nauseated. And when it's below 50, I feel shaky and confused.

But in between — where most of us with diabetes spend most of our time — it's a total crapshoot. Sometimes I'm sure my sugar's fine, but when I test it's 250. Other times I could swear I'm high but then I'll pull a perfect 100.

Believe me, if there were a fool-proof way to know my blood sugar level without testing, I would have figured it out by now. It's kind of like trying to guess what your cat is thinking: No matter how well you think you know the Beast, it's just not gonna share all its secrets with you.

But I do test at least four times a day, and still don't always get a good number. Blood sugars can fluctuate with stress, with illness, or with the time of the month in women. And of course there's the human error: I miscalculated the carbs, didn't walk far enough after eating that dessert, or simply got caught up with living my life and — for just a moment — forgot to do what I needed to do. It happens.

Forgiving my own mistakes is still very difficult. I have to remind myself that being human is part of the equation: It must be factored in, just like the carbs and everything else.

Meanwhile, I remain hopeful that the walking and the vegetables might help protect against diabetes complications in additional ways beyond blood sugar. Some scientific evidence suggests that may be true.

I often say the Serenity Prayer. It's used in 12-step programs by people coping with alcoholism and other addictions, but I think it also applies perfectly to life with diabetes: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." 🌸

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