

Living Well with Diabetes

Why Monitor Blood Glucose?

I'm sure you've asked yourself on many occasions: why am I sticking my finger and writing down these numbers? It costs money and it certainly doesn't top my list of things that feel good. Is it really necessary? The answer is a strong and emphatic "Yes!" Let's look at some of the reasons monitoring your blood glucose can help you.

Janet has type 2 diabetes and is now eating healthier food and exercising more frequently. Since she is not taking medication to control her blood glucose levels, she didn't think blood glucose monitoring was important. When she went to her regular doctor's appointment and saw that her blood glucose had gone up to 220, she was shocked. She also saw the results of her hemoglobin A1c (the test that measures blood glucose control over several months) and again was surprised at how high it was.

When Janet began monitoring her glucose levels at home several times a day, she saw where she needed to make changes. Her dinner was usually large and when she reduced the amount of starchy foods (carbohydrate) she consumed at dinner, she found her blood glucose at bedtime improved. She also noticed that on the days she walked, her numbers were always lower. Seeing the results of her efforts made Janet more motivated to continue her exercise.

Rick uses insulin in addition to eating healthy and staying active to keep his blood glucose in his target blood glucose range. He uses the results of monitoring to decide when and how much insulin to take. He knows that he has to be concerned not only with high blood glucose, but also with low blood glucose (hypoglycemia).

Since blood glucose monitoring became readily available for use at home, people with diabetes have shown marked improvement in their overall blood glucose control. Several studies have shown that close monitoring definitely improves blood glucose control, which in turn helps prevent the complications of diabetes.

An important issue here is what to do with the numbers. If you simply test and record and make no changes based on your results, your blood glucose control will not improve. It's important to work with your whole diabetes team, not just your doctor, to learn how to make adjustments in your diabetes management. Diabetes is YOUR disease, and you are the one person who makes most of the decisions about what affects your blood glucose control. YOU decide what and how much you eat. YOU decide when and how much activity you get. YOU can also learn how to make adjustments in medication with advice from your diabetes care team.

How often you should monitor depends on many factors. If you have type 2 diabetes, it's recommended that you monitor your blood glucose one to two times per day at different times. If you have type 1 or type 2 diabetes and use insulin, you should be checking your blood glucose 3-4 times a day.

When you are sick, you will need to check your blood glucose more often. Talk to your doctor about how often you should check. Changes in your schedule, activity or medication; illness; poor diabetes control; or pregnancy increases the need for additional monitoring. Your health care team can advise you how often to monitor your blood glucose.

It is important that you take on the role of decision-maker in your diabetes management. Monitoring your blood glucose helps you take more control in making these decisions. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about Medicaid, Medicare, or insurance coverage for glucose monitoring equipment.

Diabetes and Weight Control

Do you find yourself constantly dieting in an attempt to find your "ideal body weight"? Your blood glucose would improve dramatically if you could only lose all of the weight you have gained since high school. Right? Not necessarily. There is good evidence that blood glucose improves with weight loss, but you don't have to lose all of your excess weight to see the effect.

You can control your diabetes without getting down to your high school weight.

The major goals for type 2 diabetes are to keep your blood glucose as close to normal as possible and to keep your blood fats (cholesterol and triglycerides) in good control. Good eating habits and regular activity will help you achieve both of these goals and help you control your weight.

Let's start by changing your way of thinking. Stop saying you're "on a diet." What happens when you're "off the diet"? Instead, think of making diabetes and weight control the following positive lifestyle changes that will become life-long habits:

- Focus on eating healthier foods. Try making a point of eating five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Include fish at least twice each week. Think of ways to prepare foods with less fat such as using a non-stick cooking spray instead of frying your foods. Eat at home more often. Studies show we eat more fat when we eat out. Don't be unrealistic and stop eating in restaurants entirely. Learn to choose healthier foods when you do eat out.
- Space your food throughout the day. If you currently skip breakfast, eat a light lunch and eat most of your calories at night, start dividing your food into three or four fairly equal meals to help improve your blood glucose levels. Since foods that contain carbohydrate (sugars and starches) increase your blood glucose the most, try to space the carbohydrate evenly throughout the day.

- Eat smaller portions. Try to make a habit of eating only one portion of each food and not going back for seconds. To make seconds less tempting, put extra food back in the refrigerator before you sit down for a meal or prepare only enough for one meal.
- Snack less often. When you do snack, try to eat a healthy snack like fruit, carrot sticks or low-fat crackers.
- Walk at least five days a week. Gradually work up to 30-45 minutes each day. Many people with type 2 diabetes find their blood glucose levels improve a lot with regular activities like walking and biking. Talk with your doctor or other health care professional for other suggested activities if you are unable to walk.
- Monitor blood glucose levels. This gives you and your health care team valuable information on how and when to make changes in your treatment. It can also help motivate you to keep up the good work.

If you make some of these changes now, soon they will become lifelong habits. Along with many of these healthy habits you may find that you'll lose some weight. If losing weight is a priority for you, be realistic in setting your weight goals. Consider your genetics and what your lowest weight has been as an adult. Set short-term goals that you can reach with not more than 1 to 2 pounds of weight loss per week. Despite the temptation, avoid fad diets. They often promote unhealthy practices and can be harmful to your body. There are no magic bullets to help you lose weight. With healthy eating, good lifestyle habits and well-controlled blood glucose, you'll be as healthy as you can be.

Adapted from Diabetes Lifelines, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service
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