



Ways for Parents to Support Teens with Diabetes

The teen years may be the most difficult time for a young person with diabetes and their parents. When it comes to diabetes care, skipping blood glucose monitoring or insulin injections may be a way of testing the limits, or it may reflect a teen's inability to consider the potential consequences of these actions when they may be preoccupied by something else.

It's tough being a teenager and trying to manage diabetes and the day-to-day responsibilities can become stressful and frustrating. As a parent, it is important for you to try being empathetic, and understand the feelings of fear, sadness, anger and even guilt your teen may be feeling.

Your teenager may struggle with accepting the reality of their diabetes by:

- Skipping insulin doses or other diabetes medicine.
- Skipping blood glucose testing.
- Eating high-fat, high-calorie meals without adequately dosing themselves with insulin.
- Falsifying or lying about blood sugar test results.
- Hiding or denying the disease when around their friends in an effort to fit in.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1 Stay involved. It's ok for your teen to take on most of the responsibility for their diabetes care. However, you should still be involved. If you see that diabetes care tasks are not being done, let your teen know that you've noticed, and ask what's going on. Then listen carefully so that you can help your teen work out a solution. Refrain from being judgmental and keep an open mind to find solutions, especially if you're concerned about some of their behavior.

2 Accept the fact that ultimately it is up to your teen to take control of their care. Be there to support and guide. If you have encouraged your teen to assume more and more responsibility in the past and have given appropriate guidance and supervision, this transition of responsibility will be much smoother.

3 Keep the disease in perspective. Diabetes care is only one part of a person's life and it is not a priority for teens. It is not that they don't care about it, but they tend to care more about other things, such as fitting in with their friends, not being noticed for having diabetes, and not being different from their peers. They usually do not want parents, friends and teachers to focus on their diabetes, and when there is focus on it they can be easily embarrassed. They care about their activities, sports, friendships and, hopefully, class work. If diabetes care fits easily into the day, it might happen. If not, it might not happen. This behavior is normal for a teen, that's why it's your job as a parent to talk and keep lines of communication open.

4 Encourage honesty by not overreacting. Your teen will much more likely tell you the truth about what they're eating, if they are skipping injections and their blood sugars if you remain calm and supportive. Everyone with diabetes has these lapses from time to time. Praise your teenager for checking their blood sugar level and problem-solve ways to handle it effectively.

5 Find a health care provider your teen likes. A strong relationship between your teen and their doctor, nurse, social worker and dietician is critical, both to the health care provider's ability to evaluate and motivate your teen, and to your teen's ability to communicate with their health care provider. Do your best to choose health care providers who listens to what your teen has to say and who are willing to offer alternatives based on your teen's preferences. If you see your teen listening silently to a plan of care and failing to follow it once out of the office, it may be that they don't feel safe objecting to the plan or asking for accommodations. Your teen may need some help with speaking up, or might do better with a different health care provider. However, it may also be that they feel uncomfortable expressing their needs or concerns openly in front of you. So don't hesitate to allow your teen some time alone with their health care providers.

6 Consider yourself and what you are doing. Think about your own feelings, expectations and behaviors regarding your teen's efforts to become more independent. Might you be holding the apron strings too tightly? Do you feel ambivalent about letting go? Are you giving mixed messages about your teen taking on more responsibility?

7 Seek counseling. Depression is often the reason that a teen quits caring for themselves. A teen who is depressed may or may not have other symptoms of depression such as crying, anger, irritability and changes in appetite or sleep habits, but a teen who quits taking insulin and quits caring for their diabetes is sending a clear message that they need help. It may not be diabetes causing their depression, but diabetes care suffers because of it.

8 Be there for your teen. The physical and developmental turmoil of adolescence is almost universally a rough time for parents and teens. Teens with diabetes are at additional risks during this period. If you see that your teen is skipping diabetes care tasks, delivering a lecture or policing their activities is not going to be helpful. Instead, one of the best things you can do is to have an open dialogue and try your best to understand their feelings, thoughts and frustrations. Sometimes, just knowing that there is an interested parent or other team member available to support and encourage them is all that is needed to get back on track.

REFERENCES:

diabetes.org/diabetes/loved-ones
aboutkidshealth.ca
diabetesselfmanagement.com