

DIABETES AND EXERCISE: HOW, WHAT, WHEN AND WHY?

If you have diabetes or prediabetes, you've no doubt heard that regular exercise can reduce your risk. If you're not sure what exercise does for your blood sugar, here are answers for all your FAQs about exercise!

Exercise is one of the three pillars of diabetes management, together with medicine and a healthy diet.

WHY SHOULD I EXERCISE?

Exercise for type 1 diabetes increases insulin sensitivity (which means your body needs less insulin). It helps for type 2 diabetes by lowering body fat and increasing insulin production. Exercise also helps prevent foot ulcers, as movement improves blood flow to blood vessels that take oxygen and nutrition to muscles and tissue.

HOW MUCH EXERCISE DO I NEED?

For the best health benefits, at least 150 minutes (2.5 hours) a week of moderately intense physical activity is recommended, such as fast walking, lap swimming or cycling. Include muscle-strengthening activities twice a week.

HOW TO WORK OUT THE INTENSITY OF YOUR EXERCISE?

Moderate-intensity activity raises the heart rate. Breathing becomes faster and temperature increases, but talking easily is still possible. Vigorous-intensity activity raises the heart rate significantly and breathing becomes hard and fast. No more than a few words can be spoken without pausing for a breath.

WHY IS THE TIMING OF MY SESSION SO IMPORTANT?

Always consider the timing of exercise and how it affects medicine levels. To exercise safely, it's crucial for people with diabetes to track their blood sugar before, during and after physical activity.

This is especially the case if you're taking insulin or medicine that can cause low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia), as exercise draws on reserve sugar stored in the muscles and liver. As the body rebuilds these stores, it takes sugar from your blood.

HOW DO I TRACK MY BLOOD SUGAR WHEN I EXERCISE?

If you have diabetes, you must get your doctor's approval before you start an exercise plan, especially if you have been inactive. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

- The more intense the workout, the longer blood sugar will be affected – even up to 4 to 8 hours after exercise. After a workout, a slow-acting carbohydrate snack such as nuts or trail mix, can help prevent a drop in blood sugar.
- Before exercising, test your urine for ketones – the substances the body makes when it breaks down fat for energy. The presence of ketones indicates that the body doesn't have enough insulin to control blood sugar.
- Exercising with high levels of ketones may cause ketoacidosis, a serious complication of diabetes that needs immediate treatment.
- Only continue exercise once your high blood sugar level is corrected. Check your blood sugar every 30 minutes, especially if you increase the duration or intensity of the workout.
- Stop exercising if your blood sugar is 3.9 mmol/L (70 mg/dL) or lower.
- Eating or drinking something with 15 g to 20 g of fast-acting carbohydrates will raise blood sugar levels again.
- Recheck your blood sugar 15 minutes after the snack, and if still too low, eat another 15 g of carbohydrates. Repeat this process until your blood sugar reaches at least 3.9 mmol/L (70mg/dl).

HOW DO I BECOME MORE ACTIVE?

It's clear that exercise is a great way to lower blood glucose levels, improve insulin resistance and shed weight. Here are a few ideas to get you going if you're not active:

- Start slowly by making small changes to current activity levels. Find ways to bring more movement into your day, like taking the stairs and walking more. Increase your activity bit by bit, tracking it all the way.
- Set (realistic) goals. Variety is key. Choose an activity you enjoy to encourage regular participation – be it a walk or swim, a sports team practice, a martial art or dance.
- Make it social. Join your local parkrun on www.parkrun.co.za and enjoy the outdoors at a brisk pace with your friends and family.



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TRACK YOUR HEALTH WITH A FITNESS DEVICE

There's no shortage of health and fitness devices on offer that can help monitor all kinds of health data to keep you on track. Studies have found that people with diabetes who use apps and devices to record their exercise, food intake, sleep and other behaviour have better long-term blood sugar control.

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