

DIABETES ON THE MOVE

If you or a family member lives with diabetes, follow our experts' advice to ensure that things run smoothly when you're away from home

BY LYNNE GIDISH

CAREFUL planning is essential when it comes to managing diabetes away from home, explains Sister Vanessa Brown, a diabetes specialist nurse and educator at the Centre for Diabetes and Endocrinology (CDE) in Johannesburg (www.cdecentre.co.za). "The first thing you need to do is check on the climate of your destination, as extreme temperatures and high humidity may affect the accuracy of blood glucose strips and the viability of insulin. You should also research the facilities on offer, such as healthcare, pharmaceutical supplies and refrigeration, arrange mobile roaming and obtain a 24-hour emergency number from your diabetes team in case you need to call."

TIME-ZONE MANAGEMENT

When travelling in different time zones, you'll need help in adjusting the times and dosage of your insulin injections, says Sister Elsie Naicker, a KwaZulu-Natal-based accredited diabetes nurse educator (www.dessa.org.za). "That's why it's very important to consult your diabetes educator or doctor at least four to six weeks before you leave. Be sure to take along a copy of your itinerary, with departure and arrival times, flight duration and time-zone changes to determine if there's any need to adjust your insulin requirements. If there is, the changes may need to be implemented a few days before you travel to ensure an efficient and gentle transition. As a general rule, if you're travelling from west to east, days become shorter, so less basal [background or long-acting] insulin than usual may be required. Days become longer when travelling westwards, so you may need more basal insulin, but this needs to be individually tailored for you."

TOP TIPS

- Always keep your wristwatch set to the time you embarked on the plane, so you can remember when to take your basal insulin. Only adjust to local time the morning after you reach your destination.
- Don't take rapid-acting insulin until you've been given your in-flight meals, as service may be delayed due to turbulence or other factors.



TOP TIPS

- Use your short or rapid-acting insulin as prescribed by your doctor if your blood glucose levels rise, as untreated hyperglycaemia can lead to diabetic ketoacidosis – a potentially life-threatening condition, especially in people with type 1 diabetes.
- Watch out for early warning signs of hyperglycaemia: weakness, extreme thirst, frequent urination, dry skin and tongue, nausea, leg cramps, fruity odour on the breath, abdominal pains or upset stomach.

PREVENTING HYPO- AND HYPERGLYCAEMIA

A change in routine can affect your blood glucose levels, whether you're on board an aircraft or sightseeing in a foreign country. "Hypoglycaemia [low blood glucose] is common if you're doing a lot of walking and can spoil your trip, unless you plan to prevent it," says Brown, who suggests asking your doctor or diabetes educator which medication/s you can reduce and by how much. "Ensure you test your blood glucose levels before and regularly during flights and activities, and always carry glucose sweets/gel or regular Coca-Cola for treatment."

It's important not to ignore early warning signs of hypoglycaemia, ie shakiness, dizziness, hunger, sweating, irritability or moodiness, anxiety or headache, adds Naicker, who advises testing immediately if you have any of these symptoms. "Avoid alcohol and caffeinated beverages, but drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. This also helps reduce the risk of hyperglycaemia – high blood glucose levels (above 10mmol/l)."

WHAT TO PACK FOR YOUR HOLIDAY

- Two blood glucose meters, if possible (stash one in your checked luggage), plus spare batteries.
- Insulin in its original packaging and other medication (for diarrhoea, vomiting, fever and pain).
- Insulin needles and lancets.
- Blood glucose test strips.
- Strips for urine or blood ketone tests.
- Glucagon injection kits and insulin pump supplies in their original boxes.
- A letter from your doctor stating that you have diabetes and are carrying medical supplies with you.
- Rapid-acting insulin, even if you don't normally use it, for treating high blood glucose or managing sick days.
- Sources of rapid-acting carbohydrate for lows (eg glucose tablets) and non-perishable snacks such as wholegrain crackers, granola bars, rice cakes, peanut butter crackers and trail mix.

DIABETES IN SA

The Indian population in SA has the highest prevalence of diabetes, according to Naicker. "Indians have a genetic predisposition to the condition and the interplay between this genetic component, together with factors like obesity, is said to account for the increased rise in diabetes in this community. However diabetes is also on the rise among black South Africans, due to urbanisation, which results in a more Westernised diet and less physical activity, as well as obesity. Cultural beliefs tend to play a big role in this too, as being overweight is seen as a sign of wealth, while being thin is associated with having tuberculosis or HIV/Aids."

WORLD DIABETES DAY

14 November 2015
is World Diabetes
Day. The focus
this year is on the
role of healthy
eating in managing
type 1 diabetes and
how it can prevent
and manage type
2 diabetes.

REDUCE YOUR RISK OF DIABETES

"Some of the risk factors that can't be changed are age, race and family history, but there are many lifestyle changes you can implement to reduce your risk," says Naicker. These include:

- Having diabetes screening tests if you have risk factors that can't be changed, eg a family history of the disease, being over 40 or if your ethnicity puts you at higher risk.
- Managing your weight: excess body fat stored around the abdomen increases insulin resistance.
- Exercising at least 30 minutes five times a week.
- Eating a healthy, balanced diet. Watch your portion sizes and include fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, foods high in fibre and plenty of water.
- Controlling your blood pressure.

Statistics show that diabetes seldom occurs alone and is more often one of the symptoms of metabolic syndrome which is widespread and ubiquitous. Finding solutions to manage this holistically requires concerted and focused efforts. Dr Arien van der Merwe's new book *Managing Diabetes and Related Health Challenges*, R225 (Human & Rousseau) is aimed at providing practical information, with tools and techniques to regain control over your own health and wellbeing, as well as solutions for managing diabetes by changing your lifestyle. For more information check out www.DrArien.co.za



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