How to Live with Diabetes in the COVID-19 Era

Emma Shields, Senior Clinical Advisor at Diabetes UK, shares some tips on supporting people with diabetes at this challenging time.

Diabetes services have seen massive changes over the last few months as the escalating situation with Covid-19 has forced face-to-face structured group education and regular screening services to stop, and usual care to move to remote ways of working.

All people with diabetes are at risk of developing severe illness if they catch Covid-19, although the way it affects people varies. They may also be feeling more vulnerable and anxious amid changes to the way that care is being delivered.

NHS England says that diabetes services should still look to maintain and optimise the health of individuals during the pandemic, and should not underestimate the importance of these contributions to the overall health service response. Diabetes UK has put together plenty of resources at www.diabetes.org.uk/about_us/news/coronavirus to help healthcare professionals support people with diabetes at this time.

Staying well

Eating well and staying active

People with diabetes may be finding it difficult to get their usual foods at the moment or to get to the shops at all if they are self-isolating. This is stressful for anyone, but particularly so for those who primarily manage their diabetes through diet.

Tell them to try not to worry if they have to eat a bit differently, and just eat healthy food as much as possible and be mindful of portion sizes. Diabetes UK has plenty of resources to help people come up with new ideas of what to cook from their store cupboard and suggestions on adjusting recipes using the ingredients they have. Visit www.diabetes.org.uk/up-store-cupboard for more information.

Encouraging people to stay active in whatever way they can, whether by going out for a daily walk – following strict social distancing advice and keeping two metres apart – or doing exercise videos at home, is also important. There are plenty of resources at www.diabetes.org.uk/up-stay-active

Medication

Most people with diabetes should be advised to keep taking their medications as usual. However expert consensus by the Covid-19 Response Team recommends SGLT-2 inhibitors should be stopped in people with type 1 diabetes for the time being, because they can mask the symptoms of diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA), which can be caused by Covid-19. Talk to your patient about this and come up with an informed agreement together. People with type 2 diabetes should continue taking SGLT-2 inhibitors, unless they become unwell, when they are more at risk of DKA.

People may worry about access to medication at this time. There is no need for the public or NHS to stockpile insulin, diabetes medicines or tech. You may need to look out for patients making repeated requests for extra medication or diabetes supplies that you feel are unnecessary. However, be mindful that people with type 1 diabetes may need extra blood glucose and ketone test strips to manage their diabetes during illness. Above all, it is important they feel safe and have the tools they need to self-manage.

If they are self-isolating due to themselves or someone in their household displaying symptoms, they should ask a friend, neighbour or family member to collect their prescription or contact their local pharmacy.
Emotional wellbeing
People may be feeling especially anxious during this time with the added pressures of being away from friends and family and not being able to get out to appointments in the same way. They may also be worried about how it will affect their diabetes management if they become ill with Covid-19.

Self-isolation may feel lonely and difficult but you can remind them that there are many ways to stay connected to friends and family – by writing letters, using social media, video calling or talking on the phone. Our latest Fact File, which follows, talks about how you can use the 7As model to support people with their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Diabetes UK’s Helpline is staffed by highly trained advisors who can also help with questions and concerns and provide a supportive ear (see box, right, for details).

Self-care

Footcare
With many regular diabetes screening appointments cancelled, it’s even more important that people are empowered to keep up with self-care. Daily foot checks, for example, can help ensure that any problems or complications are picked up on as soon as possible.

People with diabetes should be advised to check their feet every day all over, including between the toes, using a mirror to help them if they struggle to reach down. They should look out for any cuts, blisters, dry skin, and changes in shape or temperature. Our Head of Care Dan Howarth talks through how people can check their feet at home in a video at www.diabetes.org.uk/up-checking-feet.

Red flags
Many services are using phone or video calls to ease demand for health services during the current outbreak. This means healthcare professionals need to be especially vigilant to red flag symptoms reported by their patients.

Symptoms requiring urgent investigation include:
- changes in the colour or shape of the feet
- cold or hot feet
- blisters or cuts that they can see but not feel
- foul smell coming from an open wound.

Managing when unwell
Being ill can upset diabetes management, which is stressful at the best of times, but people might be even more concerned about this at present. It’s important everyone with diabetes understands what to do if they become unwell.

People should be told to follow government advice about self-isolation if they develop Covid-19 symptoms, including not going out to the GP or pharmacy and staying at home for seven days from the onset of symptoms.

As well as self-isolating, people should be aware of sick day rules. Those who routinely check their blood sugars at home will need to do this more frequently while ill, including during the night, and be vigilant for the signs of hyperglycaemia. People who don’t check their blood sugar levels at home should also be aware of these signs.

Advise them to keep eating and drinking if they’re not well to avoid dehydration. If they are vomiting and unable to keep anything down, it’s essential that they get medical help as soon as possible.

Patients may contact you while unwell for advice and support. If you think they cannot cope with their symptoms at home, or their condition gets worse, or their symptoms do not get better after seven days, direct them to NHS 111 services, either online or by phone.

Accessing support
Diabetes UK has developed various online and print resources for you to help your patients during this time.

Our online Learning Zone is a great option to signpost people to while they’re unable to attend in-person diabetes education sessions. It provides a platform for people to learn about everything from managing blood sugars to carb counting to dealing with stress, via videos, quizzes and interactive tools. Visit www.diabetes.org.uk/up-learning-zone to find out more.

Helpline

Call 0345 123 2399 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm
Or in Scotland: 0141 212 8710, Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm.

Forum visit www.diabetes.org.uk/forum to join our forum and talk to other people with diabetes about their experiences.

Share tips with your patients on ways to manage their diabetes while staying at home using our online guide at www.diabetes.org.uk/up-staying-home.

For anyone struggling to get online, download our free leaflet, Staying at Home and Managing Diabetes, from www.diabetes.org.uk/up-staying-home-leaflet.

We’ve also got information about diabetes tech and medicines, including extended warranties for insulin pumps, at www.diabetes.org.uk/up-diabetes-tech. Our Meds & Kit guide also provides useful information around the diabetes treatments and tech available in the UK. Download it at www.diabetes.org.uk/up-meds-kit.

There are resources for healthcare professionals, including the most recent government guidance at www.diabetes.org.uk/up-hcp-covid-ressources.