

HOW TO BE A DIABETES ALLY

Advice for loved ones

Finding out your friend or family member is living with diabetes, or prediabetes can be a worrying time. You may feel you want to support your loved one to manage their condition but aren't always sure what to say or do.

But the good news is, there are small things you can do that can make a big difference. Here are some of our top tips for being a supportive ally to those living with diabetes.

Familiarise yourself with the condition

Diabetes is a serious condition where your blood glucose level is too high. It can happen if your body doesn't produce enough insulin, or the insulin it produces isn't effective.

Type 1 diabetes and type 2 diabetes are the most common types of diabetes, but other types of diabetes include gestational diabetes, type 3c, MODY and Latent Autoimmune Diabetes in Adults (LADA).

Diabetes is complex, there are many different types, and each type can be caused by multiple factors. The reasons why diabetes develops in each person will be unique to them.

Understanding the type of diabetes your loved one lives with and how it affects them day-to-day is important and could help your loved one to not feel that they need to educate everyone around them.

Be aware of diabetes biases and misconceptions

There are many misconceptions about how diabetes is caused and how it is managed.

This can add up to daily comments that blame and judge people with diabetes, from all corners of their life. Be aware of misconceptions you may hold and read up on the correct information. Some of the most common misconceptions surround:

Causes of diabetes

The reasons why diabetes develops in each person will be unique to them.

For type 2 diabetes, the risk factors include your genetics, ethnicity, age, bodyweight and where your body stores fat.

For type 1 diabetes, the risk factors include your genetics and the way your immune system responds to certain environmental factors like viruses.

Blood sugar highs and lows

There are multiple factors which can contribute to someone's blood sugar levels being too high or too low.

These include food, changes around medication, recent activity, being unwell, stress, anxiety and changes in hormones.

Cures and treatments

There is currently no cure for diabetes, though for some people with type 2 diabetes it is possible to put their diabetes into remission where their blood sugars are in a normal range again.

However, every person's body and experiences are unique, and this won't be possible for everybody living with type 2.

There are a range of treatment options available for managing diabetes.

These include medications like metformin or insulin, and changes to diet and physical activity – all of which should be discussed with your healthcare team.

Check out our diabetes misconceptions web page to ensure you don't fall for misinformation:

diabetes.org.uk/misconceptions

Avoid judging food choices

Living with diabetes can feel like a daily challenge. It involves monitoring blood sugar levels, adjusting medication and making choices around food.

Diabetes distress is what some people feel when they're overwhelmed by the relentlessness of diabetes.

This can lead to diabetes burnout – where a person feels emotionally exhausted by their diabetes and sometimes wants to give up on taking care of themselves and their diabetes.

It's important to check in on how your loved one feels about their diabetes, not just how they're 'managing' it.

Being able to talk through these feelings without fear of judgement from friends and family can be a lifeline. It could help them feel supported and understood, relieving some of the emotional toll of their condition.

More information on wellbeing support for diabetes is available at our emotional wellbeing web page:

diabetes.org.uk/emotions

Or why not join our online forum to exchange knowledge and experiences with other people living with diabetes:

forum.diabetes.org.uk/

Offer practical support

Some people find it helpful to be offered help with their diabetes; some don't.

The key is to offer and to respect the individual's wishes either way.

Some examples of how you could offer practical support include:

- Offer to help keep active with them by walking or exercising together.
- Helping prepare their tech, such as insulin pump cartridges.
- Offering to drive them to eye screening appointments or other healthcare checks.
- Keeping hypo (low blood sugar) treatments topped up and taking them with you out and about.
- Helping with carb counting or finding healthy, nutritious recipes.

Speak up if you hear ignorant comments

Don't let your loved one with diabetes deal with ill-informed comments on their own.

Misconceptions and biases around diabetes can add an emotional toll to living with the condition, placing a burden on people living with diabetes to educate everyone around them. If you hear an inaccurate or unhelpful comment from

others, use the opportunity to provide the person with the correct information.

You can find up-to-date information about diabetes at diabetes.org.uk or on the NHS website. It's important to do so compassionately however as we are all capable of making mistakes.

Educate, don't alienate and assume positive intent.

For example, you could say: "That's a really common misunderstanding. Did you know that actually..." Or, you could say: "I appreciate your view, but some people might experience things differently..."

Further support for you, or your friend or family member

Have questions or need more advice? Our helpline is here for you. Speak to one of our trained advisors on 0345 123 2399.

Join a local support group - go to our website to find out how at: diabetes.org.uk

Or learn more about diabetes stigma: diabetes.org.uk/stigma

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