

# When your loved one has diabetes

By Audrey Miller, MSW, RSW, CCRC, CCLCP

*Diabetes is a disease that affects more than two million people in Canada today, and with the aging population and rising obesity rates, this number is only expected to increase in the coming years. Now that your loved one has been diagnosed with this disease, what can you do to help?*

**A**nytime a loved one is diagnosed with an acute or chronic disease, you can feel overwhelmed. You may ask yourself, “How are our lives going to change?” As a caregiver, the first step to take is to help your loved one to understand the disease.

## **Get informed**

Diabetes occurs when the body does not produce or utilize insulin properly. Insulin is what the body uses to convert sugars and starches into energy. Essentially, there are two types of diabetes that you or your loved one can be diagnosed with.

The first type of diabetes is Type 1, which accounts for 10 per cent of all cases. The cause for this form still remains unknown. It quite often develops before the age of 30 and can occur when the body’s defense system attacks insulin-making cells in error or when the pancreas is unable to produce insulin at all.

The second form is Type 2, which occurs when the body does not correctly use the insulin it produces or the pancreas does not produce enough insulin. This form of diabetes quite often develops in adulthood and accounts for approximately 90 per cent of all cases.

Prediabetes, a related condition, occurs when your blood glucose levels are close to the levels at which you would be diagnosed with diabetes. Not all individuals who have prediabetes will progress to diabetes; however, some do, so it is important to know what factors may impact

a person’s blood glucose levels.

If not treated properly, diabetes can result in very serious complications such as heart disease, stroke, visual impairments and kidney disease to name a few. So as a caregiver of a person living with diabetes, what can you do to ensure they live a long, healthy life?

## **Find support**

Know what resources are available. Talk to others who have the disease or are living with someone who has diabetes. Contacting your local Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA) office will help you gather more information. The CDA branch often offers support groups, a multitude of programs, and educational materials.

## **Know your role**

Ultimately, the person who has diabetes has to take responsibility for their lifestyle changes to live a healthy life. However, as the caregiver, you can help make any adjustments easier.

If your loved one is not cognitively able, you may play a more significant role. You will need to ensure that they eat a well balanced diet that is low in fat (especially saturated and trans fat), moderate in salt and sugar, and includes meals based on whole grain foods, vegetables and fruit. You may also ensure that they take their required medications on-time. A nurse may need to be hired to administer any significant injections or blood glucose testing; this can be done by contacting your local government health care agency.

## Manage lifestyle

As the caregiver, you will also want to reduce the stress in both of your lives as much as possible. Exercising frequently will benefit the person's physical health by reducing their blood glucose levels, promoting weight loss and keeping their blood pressure down. And it will benefit their emotional well-being. Do things you both enjoy, and set aside time to keep stress levels to a minimum and relaxation to a maximum.

Fortunately, eating healthily is easier today than it was years ago. Labels carry a list of ingredients as well as information on carbs, calories and trans fat. As a caregiver, you can help your loved one by going grocery shopping with them.

## Work as a team

A strong united force will help win any battle. When it comes to the health of a family member or loved one, you want the best team possible, so be sure to get help from as many

people as you can. In addition to your loved one and yourself, your team may consist of

- a family physician
- a dietician
- an eye doctor
- a social worker
- a psychologist, psychiatrist or marriage and family therapist
- a podiatrist
- a dentist
- an exercise physiologist, physiotherapist, kinesiologist or trainer

Again, the person newly diagnosed with diabetes must take responsibility for their health. As the caregiver you can support them in making any necessary lifestyle adjustments and monitoring their well-being. By offering your support, you'll ensure that the person lives a relatively healthy life. ●

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“I make the most of all that comes and the least of all that goes.”

*Sara Teasdale*