

Help Control Your Diabetes With Exercise

Regular exercise helps lower your blood sugar levels and reduces your risk of diabetes-related complications.

Do you feel like you're hitting a brick wall? You have been eating well and taking your medicine or insulin as directed. But you can't seem to get your blood sugar levels as low as your doctor wants. A crucial element may be missing from your diabetes management plan: Exercise.

How exercise helps diabetes

If you have diabetes, your body either does not make enough insulin or it can't use the insulin it makes. But when you exercise, your body becomes more responsive to insulin. It takes less insulin to keep blood sugar levels in the normal range. Exercise helps the body move sugar to where it's supposed to go - the cells - instead of lingering in the blood.

Better blood sugar control does not end when the treadmill stops. Your body reaps these health benefits during your workout and for several hours after. Over time, exercise may help people with type 2 diabetes reverse their resistance to insulin. This is because physical activity helps the cells better respond to insulin.

The health benefits

Being physically active has many benefits. Because you have diabetes, you're at greater risk for other complications in the long run. This includes heart and kidney disease, and nerve and eye damage. Exercise can help cut the risk of these diseases, too. Regular exercise leads to:

- Better blood sugar control
- Lower blood pressure and *bad* (LDL) cholesterol
- Higher *good* (HDL) cholesterol
- Improved circulation
- Weight loss (if you are overweight)
- Reduced stress levels
- More energy
- Stronger heart, muscles and bones

Watch your blood sugar closely

People with diabetes need to be extra careful when they exercise. Always test your blood sugar before you start your workout. Then test it again during and after exercise. This will help you see what effect physical activity has on your body.

Do not exercise if your blood sugar is too low or too high. Your doctor can tell you the safe range of blood sugar levels for exercise. It is very important to know safe blood sugar levels for exercise when you take insulin or other diabetes medications.

Hypoglycemia. The more active you are, the lower your blood glucose levels may drop. If these levels drop too low, though, you can have a low blood sugar reaction (hypoglycemia).

Symptoms of hypoglycemia include:

- Feeling shaky
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Irritability

Keep a healthy snack and other low blood sugar supplies nearby during exercise. If you exercise for a long time at a high intensity, you may need to eat a snack during your workout. Talk to your doctor about a hypoglycemia prevention and treatment plan.

Hyperglycemia. You should not exercise when your blood glucose levels are too high (hyperglycemia). When you have high blood sugar, your body breaks down fat to make up for the missing insulin. This process produces ketones, a dangerous compound. You can become very sick when ketones build up in your blood. Doctors often suggest checking for ketones if blood sugar is high. Do not exercise if you are positive for ketones.

Tips to get started

- Check with your doctor before you start any exercise program. Your doctor will evaluate you and offer safe exercise options. You may have limited exercise choices if you have certain diabetes complications. If you have nerve damage in your feet, for example, your doctor may suggest swimming instead of walking.
- Start slow. Gradually increase the amount of time and intensity of your workouts. Begin with five to 10 minutes at a time and work up to 30 minute sessions, most days of the week.
- Find an activity you enjoy. Try biking, dancing or hiking.
- Check your feet after each workout. If you notice any sores or blisters, let your doctor know. Wear comfortable, well-fitting shoes to reduce the risk of foot problems.
- Drink water before, during and after being active to prevent dehydration