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FITNESS & EXERCISE

Make a Move

ARE YOU WORKING UP A SWEAT? HERE'S WHY YOU NEED TO AND HOW TO GET STARTED

By Barbara Brody

● When you have diabetes, exercise may do more for you than you realize. Did you know it will lower your blood sugar levels by prompting your body to use insulin more effectively? Exercise may also help you need less medication, insulin, or other therapies.

Over time, physical activity can improve your A1c level, which reflects your blood sugar control over the past three months. It also reduces blood pressure and combats stress and anxiety.

"With all of these benefits, we should send a message that exercise is a great 'medication' for people with diabetes," says Jacqueline Shahar, MEd, manager of the exercise physiology department at Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston. Start with these strategies.

1. Check with your doctor.

Your doctor will make sure you're ready for whatever you want to do. "Certain complications might warrant changing the type of exercise or the intensity," says Shahar. For example, lifting heavy weights can be dangerous if diabetes has

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damaged the blood vessels in your eyes, or you have cataracts or glaucoma. And if you have diabetes-related nerve damage in your feet, you may need to choose activities that don't put too much pressure on them. There are plenty of options. Your doctor will tell you what you can do, and may recommend you take an exercise stress test.

2. Do what you like.

You can generally do just about any type of exercise you enjoy when you have diabetes. Walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, and other cardio activities are great for torching calories and getting your heart

pumping. Your goal: Build up to at least 150 minutes per week of moderate aerobic activity.

3. Add strength training twice a week.

Using weights or working with resistance bands helps increase muscle mass. "Resistance exercise has been shown to improve glycemic control and reduce insulin resistance," says Wayne Westcott, PhD, an instructor of exercise science at Quincy College in Massachusetts. "Building muscle will also boost your metabolism, so you'll burn more calories throughout the day and night—even after your workout."

4. Check your meds and your blood sugar.

Ask your doctor about how any medicine you're taking might affect you during exercise. Some drugs might make your blood sugar drop too low, causing dizziness, fainting, or seizures. Simple steps, such as testing your blood sugar before you work out and eating a snack if your level is below 100 mg/dL, can help a lot. You can keep some juice or glucose tablets on hand for a quick boost in case your sugar does drop unexpectedly. If you take insulin or other medications, ask your doctor if you need to adjust them on days you exercise or just before heading to the gym.

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