

# My Child Has Type 1 Diabetes: Now What?

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Finding out that your child has type 1 diabetes can be overwhelming and stressful. People with type 1 diabetes have an autoimmune ailment that causes the body to attack the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas, which means they must take insulin several times a day to survive. That requires some level of comfort with needles and finger pricks (to measure blood sugar), not to mention math: Most people with type 1 need a set amount of “basal” insulin every day, plus a “bolus” dose that’s taken before meals and calculated based on how many carbohydrates the user is planning to consume.

As a parent, you’re probably also worried about how diabetes might interfere with your child’s ability to maintain friendships, play sports, or attend birthday parties that feature cake or ice cream. You might also be anxious about possible long-term complications like heart disease, nerve damage, and blindness.

These types of worries are natural, but understanding your child’s condition is the best way to keep them healthy and happy. Here are some tips to guide you as you ease into life as a parent of a child with type 1 diabetes.

## Know how to answer common questions.

If your child is old enough to talk, they’re old enough to grill you about what diabetes is and why they have it—so do your homework, learn the basics, and be ready to address their queries with age-appropriate language. Some key points to cover:

- Diabetes isn’t their fault; it’s not caused by something they did.
- It’s not going away, so they’ll need medicine (insulin) forever.
- What they eat and how much they move will impact their blood sugar.
- You will work together to keep the disease well-controlled so your child can continue to do almost everything that other kids can do.

**Build a great team.**

A pediatric endocrinologist should be your main go-to expert, but it's often helpful to work with a certified diabetes educator (CDE) as well. A diabetes educator can help you figure out how to best manage diabetes on a day-to-day basis. This healthcare professional can review and make suggestions about your child's diet, explain how to use an insulin pump/pen/syringe, and help you plan ahead and problem-solve so you know how to plan for birthday parties, physical activity, vacations, and more.

Ask your endocrinologist for a referral, or [click here](#) to search for a CDE in your area.

**Always be prepared.**

Most parents with young kids know never to leave home without snacks. But when you have a child with type 1, the stakes are even higher. If your child's blood sugar gets too low (hypoglycemia), you'll need to raise it with an easily-absorbed form of glucose.

Some non-perishable items that can get the job done include gummy bears, jelly beans, raisins, and small juice boxes. An endocrinologist or CDE should tell you how much of these items to give to your child depending on how low their blood sugar is.

A daily diabetes kit—including insulin syringes or pen needles, a blood glucose monitor, test strips, lancets, and alcohol swabs, bandages—also needs to travel with your child at all times.

**Feed them healthy foods—but don't deprive them.**

Can you imagine telling a kid that they can't ever have ice cream? The good news is that you don't have to. The idea that people with diabetes can't eat sweets is a myth. Children (and adults) with diabetes can enjoy treats on occasion, provided that they eat an overall healthy diet and properly account for any extra carbohydrates when calculating their insulin dose.

It's also worth noting that while some dietary changes may be in order, there's no such thing as a "diabetic diet." Nowadays most people with diabetes are advised to eat a well-balanced diet that contains a variety of healthy foods (especially vegetables and lean protein) and simply scale back on portion sizes if they've been overdoing it. That's the same dietary advice given to just about everyone who wants to stay healthy, even if they don't have diabetes.

Your entire family can still eat together and enjoy the same foods as each other, because a meal that's good for someone with diabetes is a meal that's also healthy for everyone else. Sharing the same foods will also help prevent a child with diabetes from feeling isolated or deprived.

**Encourage them to keep moving.**

According to the American Diabetes Association, kids with diabetes should follow the same exercise guidelines that are aimed at all children: at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity per day. That might mean rough-housing on the playground, running around the backyard, riding a bike or scooter, or participating in a team sport like basketball or soccer.

Physical activity helps keep blood sugar down, which is beneficial because chronically-high levels are what's responsible for many of the complications (like heart disease) that tend to accompany diabetes. Very high blood sugar (hyperglycemia) can also lead to an emergency called diabetic ketoacidosis.

The catch, however, is that people with type 1 have to worry about both highs and lows—and exercise can make blood sugar drop too much. In general, people with type 1 should check their glucose level before exercise to make sure it's not already too low; if it's low, try boosting it with a small snack and test again in 30 minutes to see if it's safe to get moving.

Your healthcare provider or CDE might also recommend taking a break to retest blood sugar in the middle of a long activity (like a sports game) or right afterward.

**Let them know they're not alone.**

Type 1 diabetes is relatively rare compared to type 2 diabetes, but it appears to be on the rise: Between 2001 and 2009, the number of children and teens diagnosed with type 1 increased 21%.

If your child doesn't know anyone else with type 1, consider signing up for a support group. Ask your provider if there's a group aimed at kids or families in your area, or consult your local chapter of JDRF or the American Diabetes Association.

You might also consider signing your child up for a week-long summer camp that's run by the American Diabetes Association. Kids get the chance to learn more about managing their condition while connecting with other children with diabetes.

You should also know that there are support groups and online forums that are specifically aimed at parents of children with type 1. Check out the Diabetes Research Foundation's PEP Squad, or ask your provider about in-person groups in your area.