

Myths, Facts, & Questions Surrounding Type 1 Diabetes

April 18, 2018 Hillary Lockemer MD

Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disorder in which the immune system (which normally fights infection) attacks the cells in the pancreas that make the hormone insulin.

We don't completely understand what causes Type 1 diabetes, but we know that certain genes make someone more likely to develop Type 1 diabetes.

Why some people with these genes develop Type 1 diabetes but others do not is still a mystery. Researchers propose that certain viruses, changes to bacteria in our gut, and/or exposure to certain chemicals or compounds in our environment can trigger the immune system to start attacking the pancreas.

What are the symptoms in children that parents should look out for?

Increased thirst, increased urination, increased appetite, rapid weight loss, fatigue, and new or worsening bed wetting are common early symptoms of Type 1 diabetes. Over time, children can also develop nausea, vomiting, dehydration, rapid breathing, and confusion.

Does type 1 diabetes ever affect adults?

Yes!

Recent studies suggest that 50% of all individuals with Type 1 diabetes are diagnosed after 30 years old.

We are also finding that many of these adults are initially misclassified as having Type 2 diabetes.

Is it true that eating sugar can save a diabetic's life?

Sort of—but only in specific situations!

Individuals with Type 1 diabetes must take insulin because their body is no longer able to make it.

If someone gets too much insulin (usually accidental or because of unavoidable circumstances), they can have a low blood sugar, defined as a blood sugar < 70.

While someone without diabetes can also have a low blood sugar, their body is able to make other hormones that help bring the blood sugar up naturally. Taking insulin, however, prevents the body from making these other hormones.

Someone with Type 1 diabetes and a low blood sugar MUST take sugar to help bring the blood sugar back to normal. A little goes a long way, and only 15 grams of fast-acting sugars or carbohydrates is needed!



How can parents talk to their child about having diabetes & the fear that may go along with it?

Type 1 Diabetes is a potentially life-threatening disorder, so it is scary to both children and adults. Different fears can occur at different ages. For example:

- A toddler may be most scared about getting an injection, but
- A teenager is worried about going to college and having low blood sugar when no one is around, while
- An adult may be worried about affording medications or long-term complications...

For all of these fears and levels, there are multiple resources available:

Child Life

Child Life is a service offered at most children's hospitals. These individuals help explain tests, procedures, and treatment in age-appropriate language. They can also help distract kids and help them find ways to be less nervous with things like glucose checks and insulin shots.

The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF)

[The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation \(JDRF\)](https://jdrf.org) provides a variety of resources: from kits that contain stuffed animals for kids and books for parents, to social events for individuals of all ages with diabetes, to mentor programs (meet one-on-one with another person or family who knows what it's like to have Type 1 diabetes). You can find your local chapter and other resources online at jdrf.org.

Disney & ESPN

Disney & ESPN have partnered with one of the companies that makes insulin. They have created books for different ages that discuss Type 1 diabetes. There are even characters on Disney shows and online activities to help children and teens with Type 1 diabetes understand the disease better while feeling more included.

Diabetes Camps

Diabetes Camps are a great way for kids with Type 1 diabetes to interact with other kids with Type 1. Many kids will see their peers at camp doing their own blood sugar checks or giving their own insulin and this can empower a child to be more comfortable with the basics of diabetes care. Kids also learn about the newest technology and treatment options at camp because they interact with so many other individuals with Type 1 diabetes.

If a child or teen is really struggling with the diagnosis and/or treatment of Type 1 diabetes, meeting with a counselor or therapist may be necessary.



Helping Your Child Manage Their Diabetes

Some things parents can do to help their child:

#1 – Don't lie to your child.

Blood sugar checks and insulin shots hurt; they just don't hurt as badly as the shots they usually get. Instead, focus on how this is necessary to keep them healthy and doing all the things your child loves to do (playing sports, drawing, etc.).

#2 – Take one for the team.

Check your own blood sugar, or if old enough, allow your child to check your blood sugar. Especially at diagnosis, showing your child that you are willing to see what they experience goes a long way to making them feel like this is a team effort.

#3 – Give your child some control.

Let your child decide when he/she is ready to give her own insulin shots.

It's tough for adults to do something that they know will hurt, let alone asking a child to do this. Everyone matures at their own pace, but most children don't even have the muscular coordination or hand size to give a shot before 10 years old.

Another way to have your child feel like they have some control is by allowing them to choose which finger they use to check their blood sugar or the location of their insulin shot. As a parent, just make sure they don't always pick the same spot!

#4 – Leave your emotions at the door.

It's ok for you and your child to have different feelings about diabetes (anger, sadness, frustration, etc.). However, you want the steps associated with diabetes care to be as routine as brushing teeth or looking for cars before crossing the street.

Parents are just as nervous as children about checking a blood sugar or giving an insulin shot; if a child senses your fear, it will be that much harder. Even if you are merely pretending to be confident, it will help relieve your child's anxiety AND they will be more cooperative.

On the flip side, don't get suckered in by your child's tears or screams. It's so difficult as a parent to see your child cry, but regularly and consistently checking blood sugars and taking insulin is necessary to keep your child alive and healthy.

When should you see a doctor?

If your child is suddenly drinking more, urinating more, and seems to be eating all the time but is still losing weight, definitely have their Pediatrician evaluate them as soon as possible.

If your family has someone with Type 1 diabetes already, other family members can be screened to see what is their risk of developing Type 1 diabetes; talk to a [Pediatric or Adult Endocrinologist](#) to learn more about this.

Myths Surrounding Type 1 Diabetes

Myth: Type 1 diabetes is caused by eating too much sugar.

FACT: Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disorder and is not related to dietary habits.

Myth: People with Type 1 diabetes can cure it w/ diet and exercise.

FACT: People with Type 1 diabetes are unable to make insulin; therefore, the only treatment is insulin.

Myth: People with Type 1 diabetes shouldn't eat any sugar at all.

FACT: People with Type 1 diabetes should follow a healthy, well-balanced diet like everyone else. This also means they can occasionally have treats like ice cream, cake, chips, and Halloween candy.

People with Type 1 diabetes should NOT have sugary drinks (regular soda, Gatorade, Kool-Aid, sweet tea, etc.) because they cause blood sugars to rise very high, and insulin does not work fast enough to bring the blood sugar down.

About Hillary Lockemer, MD

Dr. Hillary Lockemer is a pediatric endocrinologist with WakeMed Physician Practices – Pediatric Endocrinology. She is board certified in pediatrics and [pediatric endocrinology](#) and has been involved in numerous research studies related to pediatric endocrinology.

[Schedule an appointment with Dr. Lockemer today.](#) You can also [follow Dr. Lockemer on her Facebook page.](#)