

Keeping tabs on diabetes

CONTROL. That's the magic word for diabetes. Poorly controlled diabetes makes you feel lousy throughout the day and affects your ability to work. On the other hand, good control helps you feel well from day to day. In the long run, it prevents long-term complications, such as heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, blindness, nerve damage and poor healing of wounds.

The key is to keep your blood glucose levels as close to normal as possible, by watching when and how much food you eat, especially high-sugar foods. You may choose to substitute added sugar in your beverages with low-calorie sweeteners. You should also be more physically active and exercise regularly.

You can gain control over your diabetes by monitoring your blood glucose levels. A simple finger-prick test can show you whether your blood glucose is high or low. These results enable you to take appropriate steps to bring it back to normal.

Just like keeping an eye on your credit card expenditures stops you from overspending, keeping track of your blood glucose levels will protect you from exceeding the normal limits. Seeing your own positive results will also motivate you to keep managing the disease well.

World authorities recognise monitoring of blood glucose as the cornerstone of diabetes management. The International Diabetes Federation regards it as essential to improve the safety and quality of treatment. The American Diabetes Association adds that blood-glucose monitoring allows patients to assess whether they are reaching their control targets.

At the National Diabetes Institute (NDI), we recommend that everyone with diabetes monitor their blood glucose to improve their control of diabetes.

Getting to know your blood glucose

You can monitor your blood glucose at your family clinic or hospital as part of your routine check-up. There are a variety of tests available, ranging from basic to sophisticated.

You can also walk into any pharmacy to pay for a finger-prick test on the spot. However, as such tests are usually done at the spur of the moment, the results depend on what you have been doing at the time.

Diabetologists recommend monitoring your own blood glucose at home. Here are some tips to help you get started:

- Choose a good meter. A good glucometer will last you a long time. It usually comes in a kit that also includes the lancet and test strips. There are many models available, but you should choose one that suits you best. Talk to

Keeping your blood glucose within safe limits is the key to staying well and preventing diabetes complications. This week, 'Fight Against Diabetes' looks at how you can keep track of your blood glucose levels.



Blood glucose monitoring for diabetes should not be a once-off or a haphazard exercise carried out when you feel like it. It should be carried out daily, even if your blood glucose appears to be strictly controlled.

your doctor or other people with diabetes and shop around before you buy one.

The meters and strips come in a range of prices. While price is an important factor to consider, you should also weigh the other features of the meter. Choose one with a size and weight that you're comfortable with. Make sure it is easy to use and convenient for travelling or an active lifestyle.

Advanced technology has produced meters that only require a small amount of blood and give you fast and accurate results. Finally, ask for a demonstration of the meters before purchasing.

- Learn the technique. If this is your first time, ask your doctor,

nurse or diabetes educator to demonstrate the proper technique. With practise, it will become easier and you will make less mistakes. Once or twice a year, check your technique with your healthcare team.

- Know your targets. The ideal targets for your blood glucose are 4-6 mmol/l (before meals) and 6-8 mmol/l (2 hours after meals). Specialists now recommend that all people with diabetes must strive to achieve these targets and keep their HbA1c value (a measure of your glucose control over the last two to three) within normal limits, ie less than 6.5%. If you have not been monitoring your blood glucose, start working towards the recommended targets with the right



Good control of blood glucose is essential to help prevent complications such as poor healing of wounds.

meter and physical activity.

- Fix a routine. If you are new to monitoring, you may forget to do so. Fix certain times of the day when you should do it. Plan this routine with your doctor. Most diabetologists recommend checking before meals, two hours after meals, before or after exercise and before going to bed. Checking after meals gives you an idea of how your body responds to food and helps you manage diabetes the best way. If this is not cost-effective, you can rotate checking before and after meals throughout the week.

● Be flexible. You can adjust the timing according to your daily schedule. You can even monitor if you're out with friends, at work or travelling. Sometimes, you may do it a little later than planned, but the results are still valuable to tell you how you are doing at the moment. If monitoring has become a habit, it won't hurt to miss it once or twice.

- Keep a record. Writing down your results, and the date and time of testing, allows you to assess your control over a period of time. Show the records to your doctor at each check-up. Some glucometers have a memory chip that can record your blood glucose values over a period of time. Bring your meter along to your checkups so that the doctor can check your blood glucose control. Discuss with him the pattern of your blood glucose fluctuations.

● Plan how often to monitor. The need to monitor daily depends on how well-controlled your diabetes is. Generally, the more frequently you monitor, the better. However, keep up the monitoring even after you've gained tight control. Diabetes is a chronic, progressive disease that is currently incurable. You should always stay one step ahead of it.

- Monitor according to your situation. If you're pregnant, monitor vigilantly as high blood glucose levels can affect your pregnancy and cause harm to your unborn baby. If you fall sick, your body's ability to regulate blood glucose is affected. You should also monitor more frequently, to be aware of your blood glucose fluctuations in order to adapt to it. Let your doctor know if you notice any major fluctuations in your daily levels. Knowing your blood glucose values gives you control over your diabetes.

■ 'Fight Against Diabetes' is an educational programme by the National Diabetes Institute (NDI), supported by educational grants from EGAM, SenecaCare Bureau and OneTouch Centre by LifeScan (a Johnson & Johnson company). To receive our free educational magazine, call 011 5621 1406.

YOUR GUIDE TO DEALING WITH LOWS AND HIGHS

If your results are... You should...

Below normal range

- Check your blood glucose again
- If it is still low, and you're experiencing signs of hypoglycaemia, take some carbohydrate (half glass of fruit juice or regular soft drink, 3 sweets or 3 teaspoons of sugar)
- Check your blood glucose again to make sure it is now back to normal
- Continue monitoring your blood glucose for five days at all meals
- Avoid drinking, operating heavy machinery or going anywhere alone

Above normal range

- Check your blood glucose again
- Reduce your carbohydrate intake slightly at your next meal
- Adjust your dose of insulin or medication (but only upon proper instructions from your doctor)
- See your doctor if high levels persist

