

Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time











Diabetes and Helping Teens Cope

Growing up can be difficult for teens, and they may face many challenges. The added challenge of coping with diabetes requires support, understanding and patience. The life of a teen can be complex. As a result, diabetes management may not be their number one priority. You can support your teen and help them cope.

As a child matures, the challenge for many families is finding the balance between parental monitoring and teen independence¹. It's important to be very involved with the health needs of teens, but parents should be aware that they cannot be with their children 24 hours a day. Teens are natural risk-takers. They may be searching for their place in the world and working at becoming independent. Their body image and peer groups are very important and powerful influences. It's important for parents or anyone else involved in the life of a teen with diabetes to be present in a supporting role. Supporting a teen that is coping with diabetes is vital not only their wellness, but also to their overall happiness.

Talking openly with teens can be challenging whether it is about diabetes or other things. Even if they feel uninterested in the opinions of others, they still need guidance. It's important to build a trusting and supportive relationship. Below are some suggestions on supporting your teen from the Canadian Diabetes Association²:

-  **Recognize how devastating diabetes can be to a teen.** They want to be carefree, and independent, just like their friends. Instead, they may feel burdened with a lifelong condition and restricted by tests and injections. Help your teen figure out ways to fit diabetes into their schedule and share the load where you can (help them record their blood glucose results or offer to assist them with one of their injections each day).
-  **Understand, and help your teen understand, that adolescents with diabetes require more insulin as they grow and go through puberty.** This is normal. It is not a sign of worsening diabetes.
-  **Be positive and non-judgemental about your teen's diabetes management.** Avoid using terms such as 'good' or 'bad' when referring to your teen's blood glucose levels. Instead, focus on helping them evaluate their blood glucose levels and determining a course of action. For example, say: 'Your blood glucose is higher than your target, so what do you need to do?'

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Encourage your teen to participate in sports and other activities. Help them to figure out how to prevent low blood glucose (hypoglycemia), which often accompanies increased activity, by testing frequently and either reducing insulin or increasing food intake.
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Ensure that your teen understands the potentially devastating consequences that smoking, alcohol and drugs can have for people with diabetes. If you are not comfortable talking with your teen about these issues, be sure to ask your diabetes professional to raise the subject with them.
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Avoid focusing on weight and body shape. Rather, focus on promoting a healthy lifestyle for all members of the family. Some teens discover that when they are getting inadequate amounts of insulin they lose weight. Although the discovery may be accidental, some teens are tempted to reduce or skip their insulin repeatedly in order to lose weight. This risky behaviour leads to poor glucose management, a risk of diabetes ketoacidosis (a life-threatening condition that arises from a serious insulin shortage) and a high risk for long-term complications.
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Keep the lines of communication open. Instead of nagging or criticizing, use open-ended questions that encourage conversation. For example, ask: 'How do you feel you are coping with your diabetes?', 'What are you finding most difficult about it?', or 'What would help you now?'
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Be flexible and willing to help or step back as your teen needs. Watch for signs that your teen is struggling with their diabetes management: signs of high blood glucose levels (frequent urination, extreme thirst), low blood glucose episodes (hypoglycemia), poor school attendance, depression or a significant change in behaviour. If your child shows any of these signs, re-involve yourself in their diabetes and talk to their diabetes professional for further advice.

Encourage decision-making skills. Ask your teen how they would handle specific situations. Let them answer and support appropriate answers. Then make suggestions rather than telling your teen what to do and how to do it. Teens need consistent and clear messages about diabetes care.

With patience and a positive attitude, you can help your teen become a responsible, independent and healthy young adult. For more information, visit www.diabetes.ca or contact your EFAP.

1. <http://www.diabetes.ca/diabetes-and-you/youth/teens/>

2. <http://www.diabetes.ca/diabetes-and-you/youth/teens/>



For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

1.866.299.1299

1.866.398.9505 (Numéro sans frais - en français)

1.888.384.1152 (TTY)

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