Understanding Type 1 Diabetes for Parents and Guardians

What is Type 1 Diabetes?

Type 1 diabetes is a chronic condition in which the body does not produce insulin, a hormone that helps change sugar (glucose) from food into energy. This life-threatening condition causes high levels of sugar in the blood. Without insulin, glucose gets "stuck" in the bloodstream and the body cannot use it for energy. Type 1 diabetes, once known as juvenile diabetes, is the most common type of diabetes diagnosed in children and young adults under 20 years of age, which is why parents and guardians need to know how to support their children.

Symptoms of Type 1 Diabetes – Know When to Seek Help

The most common warning signs of type 1 diabetes are:

- **Increased thirst**: Your child may drink more water than usual.
- **Frequent urination**: Your child may need to go to the bathroom more often.
- **Extreme hunger**: Your child might still feel very hungry even after eating.
- **Unexplained weight loss**: Your child might lose weight without trying.
- **Fatigue**: Your child may feel tired or weak.
- **Blurred vision**: Your child's vision might become unclear.

How is Type 1 Diabetes Managed?

Type 1 diabetes can become immediately life-threatening when certain symptoms are present. If your child is showing signs of severe high or low blood sugar, dehydration, confusion, rapid breathing, or other concerning symptoms, it is crucial to seek emergency care right away. Don't wait until the next available day to speak with a health care provider. If you are unable to contact your doctor or do not have one available, go to the nearest hospital emergency department immediately. Delaying treatment can have serious consequences, and it's always better to err on the side of caution.

Managing type 1 diabetes might seem overwhelming at first, but you will get the hang of it. It is important to balance food, medicine, and exercise.

1. **Insulin Therapy**: Children with type 1 diabetes must take insulin daily through injections or an insulin pump. This helps control blood sugar levels. If you feel you cannot afford insulin, ask your child's health care provider about programs available through the state of Illinois and drug companies that can make it more affordable.
2. **Blood Sugar Monitoring**: Regularly checking blood sugar levels is important. This helps determine how much insulin is needed and keeps blood sugar within a healthy range. Your child's health care provider can teach you and your child how to do this.
3. **Healthy Eating**: Offer meals and snacks that fit your child's meal plan. A balanced diet is essential to help manage blood sugar. It should focus on:
    a. **Fruits and vegetables**
    b. **Whole grains**
    c. **Lean proteins**
    d. **Healthy fats**
    e. **Limited sugary snacks and drinks**

    Talk with your health care provider if you cannot consistently provide your child with these healthy eating options. They may be able to connect you with resources.

4. **Regular Exercise**: Encourage your child to get at least 30 minutes of physical activity most days. Exercise can help lower blood sugar levels and improve overall health.

5. **Keeping Up to Date with Vaccinations:** Children with diabetes should have all recommended vaccinations, including a flu shot every year, to prevent serious infections. Children with diabetes are more likely to get sicker from an infectious disease and take longer to recover from an infection than children without diabetes. (See the HealthyChildren.org Immunizations webpage.)

Supporting Your Child

As a parent or guardian, your support is vital.

- **Educate**: Teach your child about type 1 diabetes and why they must manage it. Understanding their condition helps them feel more in control. Consider enrolling them in a Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support (DSMES) program and attending yourself when possible. You can find an accredited DSMES program through the program finder offered by the Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists.
- **Encourage Healthy Choices**: Motivate your child to eat healthy and exercise. Be a role model by making healthy choices as a family. The Diabetes Food Hub, which is maintained by the American Diabetes Association, provides budget-friendly recipes and cooking tutorials.
- **Communicate Openly**: Talk about diabetes openly. Encourage your child to express how they feel about their condition and any challenges they face.

Managing Diabetes at School

- **Support:** It is important to partner with your child's school to ensure they have a good experience and get the support they need. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has published suggestions for how to most effectively work with your child's school on its Managing Diabetes at School webpage.
- **Develop a Plan:** Schools are required to have a care plan for students with diabetes (or other chronic health conditions). The plan outlines specific services, accommodations, and supports tailored to the student's needs.
- **School Nurse**: If your child's school employs a nurse, you will want to work with them to plan a supportive way to help manage your child's health during the school day. They can help administer insulin and monitor your child's health during school hours.

Conclusion

Understanding type 1 diabetes is essential for helping your child lead a healthy and active life. You can help your child navigate their journey with this condition. Always consult with health care providers for personalized advice and guidance. With proper management, education, and support, children with type 1 diabetes can thrive!

Websites

- Managing Diabetes at School
- Diabetes Research, Education, Advocacy | ADA
- BreakthroughT1D.org
- Illinois Care of Students with Diabetes Act
- Managing Diabetes in Schools | Managing Health Conditions in School | CDC
- Help for Parents | American Diabetes Association
- Find an Accredited Diabetes Education Program (adces.org)
- Diabetes Food Hub
- Welcome to the Health Insurance Marketplace® | HealthCare.gov
- Provider Notice Issued 07/29/2022 (illinois.gov)
- findhelp.org by findhelp - Search and Connect to Social Care
- (Immunizations - HealthyChildren.org)