

## Men and Diabetes

*Learn what to do for sexual or job issues*

Life with diabetes can be challenging. That's true whether:

- you have type 1 diabetes or type 2
- you are young or older
- you are a man or a woman

Still, the challenges you face may depend on your age and gender.

I see this in my own family. My sister and my son have had diabetes since childhood. Yet, they lead very different lives. She is a middle-aged woman. He is a young man just starting a family. So, diabetes affects them in different ways.

I'll tell you about issues that affect many men who have diabetes. But, none of these issues applies to all men. And some issues apply to many women. Keep in mind that each person's life with diabetes is unique.

### Sexual issues

More than half of men with diabetes over age 50 have a problem with impotence. Another name for impotence is erectile dysfunction, or ED. Having ED means the penis often fails to get or stay hard enough for sex. Men with diabetes get ED up to 15 years earlier than other men.

There can be many causes for ED. In men with diabetes the most common causes are nerve and blood vessel problems. Depression can also cause ED. So can some medicines. ED is a serious problem for most men who have it. And many men worry about getting ED.

## What you can do

First, be clear what ED is not. You do not have ED if:

- you can't get an erection once in awhile
- you have less sexual desire
- you ejaculate too quickly
- you can't ejaculate

ED means you can't get or keep an erection.

If you don't have ED, help keep it that way. Prevent nerve and blood vessel problems. Nerve damage blocks the signal telling the penis to get hard. Blood vessel blockages reduce blood flow to the penis, so it can't get hard. To limit nerve and blood vessel problems:

- Keep your blood sugars as close to normal as you can.
- Don't smoke!
- Don't drink too much alcohol.
- Keep your blood pressure under control.

If you think you might have ED, you should talk to your health care provider about it. Most of us do not like to talk about our sex lives. So, I know it may be difficult to take my advice. If you are already comfortable talking with your provider about sex, good for you! If not, here are some things to talk about with your provider.

Talk to your doctor about ED. You may start by trying to figure out the cause of your problem. This may involve:

- a review of your medications
- tests to see if you get erections while you sleep
- tests for blood vessel and nerve damage

Some medicines for high blood pressure, depression and anxiety can cause ED. So, changing the medicine (when you can) might help. If a test shows you get erections when you sleep, you do not have ED. In that case you might talk to a counselor who helps people deal with sexual issues.

There are now a number of treatments that work for ED. These include devices and medicines. Devices can be as simple as a tight ring to put around the penis to

help men who get erections but lose them too soon. Or, they can be as elaborate as pump devices put into the penis during surgery.

Several ED medicines have gone on the market in recent years. One that made a big splash seems to work for men with diabetes. Your health care provider can help find the right treatment for you.

So do yourself a favor: do all you can to prevent ED. If you have it or think you might, get help. It's out there.

Diabetes may play a role in women's sexual problems as well. But, we do not know a lot about this. We have a lot to learn about how diabetes affects the sex lives of men *and* women.

## **Job issues**

More and more women are joining men in all sorts of jobs. But, some jobs are still mostly male. They include:

- commercial pilot
- active duty member of the military
- police officer
- firefighter
- heavy equipment operator
- interstate truck driver

These are also jobs that people with type 1 diabetes can't have. In 1990, The Americans With Disabilities Act was passed. This removed many barriers to work for people with diabetes. But, barriers to jobs that affect public safety stayed in place. This raised the question of whether those with type 1 diabetes (or anyone with diabetes) in such jobs would threaten public safety. So far, we do not know enough to answer this question.

## **What you can do**

If you feel your diabetes limits your job choices, answer a few questions. First, are you being discriminated against? Are you being denied a job because you have diabetes? Has your employer refused to make any adjustments at work to help you manage your diabetes? If any of these is true, you may be able to get help under the Americans With Disabilities Act. Call the American Diabetes Association at 1-800-DIABETES to learn more.

Second, are you doing all you can so your diabetes doesn't affect your work? Good blood sugar control can mean fewer days that you miss work or aren't at your best.

Third, do you want a job not offered to people with type 1 diabetes? One patient of mine had finished training to be a pilot when he learned he had the disease. Many other patients have been forced to give up jobs for the same reason. If this has happened to you, I'm really sorry. I hope every person with diabetes will soon have the right (and the health) to do any job he or she wants. Keep up with new research on diabetes and safety. And help make sure the facts reach those who make the laws.

## **Coping issues**

In a previous article, "[Women and Diabetes](http://www.onetouch.com/articles/womendiabetes)," I told you about some of my research. (Visit this website at: <http://www.onetouch.com/articles/womendiabetes>.) It showed that men report fewer problems managing their diabetes than women. They have far less problems related to diet. Men also say they get more support and less hassling from their spouses when it comes to managing diabetes. These findings make sense based on what we know about men and women in general. Men tend to worry less about what they eat. Men also shop and cook less. They also tend to get more emotional support than they give.

But, all men are not alike. Lots of men have problems managing their diabetes. And plenty of men get little support and lots of hassles from their spouses when it comes to diabetes. These men may also be depressed.

Men who are struggling to cope need just as much support as women. They may need even more. That's because many men have trouble asking for help.

## **What you can do**

Diabetes can be a hard disease to live with. If you are struggling to cope, it does not make you less of a man. No man (and no woman) manages diabetes perfectly. Get the help you need to get back on track. Talk to someone you trust. That could be a family member or friend, your health care provider or someone else with diabetes. Take that first step and go from there. Once you are coping better, everything will look brighter. Then you will have the energy to tackle diabetes.

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