

## Must Know Health Info

Health Information from the Experts at Johns Hopkins Medicine



### **Diabetes and Stress**

#### *Common stress in diabetes and what you can do to manage it*

Most of us lead stressful lives. We do our best to balance work, family and other life stress. If you add diabetes, this makes things more stressful. That is because diabetes is with you all the time. It is with you where ever you are, no matter what you are doing. Diabetes is there too – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's no wonder that people who have diabetes tend to have more stress.

#### **The immediate effects of stress**

Stress is bad for anyone; it feels bad. This is why they call it feeling distressed. Stress can also hurt your body. It can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Stress can have a quick and powerful effect on your blood sugar level. Here is a good example. A man had a really tough boss. The boss worked in the same office several days a week. The boss worked in another office the other days. On days when his boss was out of the office things went smoothly. The man was relaxed. His blood sugars were often very close to normal. When his boss was in the office it was a different story. The man's stress level was really high. His blood sugars shot up. He could not keep them down unless he took much more insulin.

If stress causes your blood sugars to rise, you might want to know why. When you are stressed, your body releases stress hormones. This happens if you have diabetes or not. We call these "fight or flight" hormones. These hormones help your body prepare to deal with the source of stress. These hormones raise your blood sugar levels. This gives you the extra fuel you need to fight or flee from stress. This was a good thing for most of human history. In the past almost all sources of stress involved danger to your body. Today things are different; most of our stress can't be relieved by fighting it or running from it. Extra blood sugar doesn't cause much of a problem for most people. But it presents a big problem if you have diabetes. This is because your pancreas does not work as well. It can't give you

enough insulin to get your blood sugars back down. Your blood sugars may stay high unless you take action to bring them back down.

## **The long-term effects of stress**

Now what if you aren't like the man with the boss who stressed him out? What if stress doesn't affect your blood sugars right away? Stress could still affect your long-term control. I call this the "wear and tear effect." It is a lot of work to take care of diabetes and the rest of your life. That effort can be too much and you may feel a lot of stress. One woman has said, "When I feel like it's too much, I just say, 'to hell with it.' I don't stop doing it all, but I do let my diabetes care slip. I don't eat as well, walk as much, or test my blood as often." Then she added, "And you know what, when I say to hell with it, that's straight where I go."

This is a story that happens often. Too much stress drains a person's drive for diabetes care. Less active care leads to higher blood sugars. Your body may feel worse. You may feel guilty and scared. This creates more stress. It can feel like you are in a hole, and you are going deeper and deeper. You know things aren't right; you want to turn them around, but the cycle of stress has got you down.

## **What you can do to manage stress**

Stress is a big problem for many with diabetes. But, there are things you can do to manage it. First, you should try to figure out what things cause you the most stress. You should at least think of one thing that's bothering you a lot. It can be hard to be sure what's stressing you. But, if you can spot what makes you stressed, you can pick the best way to get your stress down. As I said, many sources of stress are not due to your diabetes. Here, we will talk about stress from diabetes. But, these tips will work well for other sources of stress as well.

There are some common sources of stress from diabetes. Are any of these stressful for you?

- Watching what you eat every day
- Taking your medicine every day
- Testing your blood sugar as you should
- Feeling bad from blood sugar levels that go up and down
- Fear of diabetes problems
- Dealing with diabetes problems

**Change your situation—when you can.** I’ve found two good ways to relieve stress. The first is to change your situation. Leave a stressful job, if you can. Keep foods that tempt you to binge out of the house. Ask a loved one to stop nagging you about testing your blood. Take a “mental health break”. Relax in the tub for a few minutes. Even small things can make a big change in the stress you feel.

**Change your response.** Even when you change your situation, you may still feel stress. There may be times when you cannot change your situation. You may be able to change the way you respond to stressful times. This may help you cope better. There is a process called “reframing”. It helps you look at things in a new way. You may see new ways to change your situation. Or you may see new ways to react to your situation.

Drawing upon your faith in a higher power can help. You can also draw upon your faith in yourself. Here is an example of having faith in yourself. There was a restaurant chef who made great, fancy food. The food had a lot fat and calories but tasted great. He found out he had diabetes. At first he was very upset. He felt better when he told himself that he was a talented chef. He had faith he could learn to cook tasty, healthier food. He cooked this new food for himself and his restaurant. He was happy to see his weight and his blood sugars come down. He did not lose any patrons at the restaurant.

Letting go can help, too. All of us want things we really deserve to have. But, some things we will probably never get. It can be hard to let go sometimes. But, you may have to let go to keep your stress at a level you can control. I try to live by the words of the Serenity Prayer.

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Where could you apply this prayer in your life?

Don’t forget to laugh. Laughter can heal the stressed-out soul. Make sure you find at least one thing to laugh about every day. What touches your funny bone?

So, there are two things you can try to relieve stress. You can try a combo of the two. Change your situation when you can. Change how you think about your situation. Each of these works with the other one. If you change your situation, you will change how you think about it. If you change how you think about it, you will

change your situation. If you do one, you are likely to end up doing both. You will end up with less stress.

Diabetes can add a lot of stress to your life. But you can find ways to manage that stress. You might end up like this man. He said, “I know it sounds strange, but diabetes has in fact made my life less stressful. I used to try to do it all, always pressuring myself. At first the diabetes made things worse. It just added to the pressure. I finally got the idea that I couldn’t do it all. I made some hard choices. I ended up with a much more manageable life, with a lot less stress. I’m surprised it turned out this way, and I’m really happy that it did.”

***\*\*Authored by Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins Health System\*\****