3 Tips for Managing Diabetes at Work

by ANGELA FINLAY

Coping With Diabetes at Work

Work is a necessary part of everybody's life, but it can be a much bigger concern for diabetics. When you already live with a fairly strict schedule, overlapping work responsibilities can overwhelm your mind and leave your body more vulnerable to complications.

A better work-life rests on good diabetes management and a healthy relationship with your employer. Once you have a handle on the best methods to manage your blood sugar, test your blood, and prevent diabetic problems from arising, learn how to communicate your needs and limitations in a professional manner.

The better you understand your condition, the better you can work with it — and around it — for a more successful career. Below are some tips to help with coping with diabetes at work

Get Organized

When you live with type 1 or type 2 diabetes, timing is everything. You learn to plan your meals at the same time each day, and you get in the habit of checking your blood sugar at regular intervals. If you're on top of your condition, you're attentive to the number of quality sleep hours you get each night, and how many minutes of exercise you squeeze into each week.

The challenge arises when your work schedule and your diabetes schedule clash. Shift work is notorious for disrupting diabetes management, but even a desk job can make it difficult to keep track of everything on your plate. Luckily, there are a few techniques to simplify your hectic schedule:

Keep Visual Cues and Records

A clear, color-coded schedule can help you stay on track with a simple glance. You can block out medication, meals, testing times, and any other management strategies with separate colors on an online calendar, or go low-tech and use a paper print-out.

The bonus to manually recording your meals, snacks, medications, and blood sugar levels on paper is you can keep it next to your desk or workstation, right in your line of vision at all times.

Store More Snacks

Keeping your blood sugar level is one of the most difficult tasks for diabetics, but a quick snack will go a long way to restoring balance. Unfortunately, it's not always appropriate to run to the break room for a bite, so find foods that are easy to store and quick to consume.

Glucose tablets and specialty diabetic snacks provide a surge of glucose your body can use right away, and

sweetened drinks can be a good stand-in when you can't keep a stash of food by your side.

Hard candies are both convenient and effective, plus they're very discreet. In any case, stock more than you think you'll need, so you're prepared in case of an emergency.

Consider Different Medication

If matching your meals and medication is too much to manage, you might want to speak with your doctor about switching to an extended-release or long-acting form of insulin. This type of insulin requires fewer injections, which can save you from injecting yourself in your workplace.

The lower-maintenance your medication, the more time you'll have to focus on your daily tasks, and the less you'll worry about worst-case scenarios.

Reducing Stress During Your Workday

Stress can complicate your diabetes management more than you might imagine. Not only will it drive up your blood pressure and increase insulin resistance, but it can be such a distraction that you neglect your monitoring and find yourself in a diabetic emergency.

Here are some tips to make things run smoothly and worry-free:

- **Create a discreet blood test kit**. If a lack of privacy has you worried about testing your blood, you can make a kit to keep at your desk, including individually-wrapped alcohol wipes and an empty milk carton for safe disposal of any equipment.
- **Opt for insulin pens**. The new insulin pens on the market don't need to be refrigerated, so you can keep them with you at all times, and a bit of practice is all it takes to use them quickly and easily. Long-acting insulin is another option to cut down on the pains of administering the medication in a public place.
- **Find a confidant**. Having a trusted friend or colleague around who knows the signs of a diabetic emergency can bring you peace of mind, and even save your life.

If you have a very hard time switching off your anxious responses during the day and falling asleep at night, consider working with a meditation guide or relaxation counselor to find some readily-available techniques that work well for you.

Making Your Workplace Work for You

Sometimes it feels like nobody understands your condition, and when times are tough, it can seem like you have few allies at the office. However, you do have the law on your side.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers with 15 or more employees to make reasonable accommodations to help you manage your diabetes in the workplace, as long as those accommodations don't interfere with your duties or disrupt the office.

Some people would rather keep their condition to themselves, and that's perfectly alright — you are not obligated to tell your boss you have diabetes. However, sharing your health details can relieve the stress of keeping a secret, and it's the only way to activate the full catalog of your employee rights.

If you're not sure what exactly you need, and you don't want to push your luck, begin with the basics. You should feel comfortable asking your employer for:

- A place to test your blood sugar, take your insulin, and rest when your blood sugar is out of control.
- Multiple short breaks to eat a snack, test your blood sugar and take medication according to your doctor-prescribed schedule.
- Medical leave for treatment or recuperation from diabetes complications.

If your employer just can’t see your side of things — or you expect the conversation to go that way — bring a doctor’s note to help get your point across. Although it’s against the law, discrimination does happen, and if you begin to personally experience the consequences of diabetes discrimination, it’s time to seek help from an advocacy group through the American Diabetes Association.