Take Control of Your T1D with Exercise

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The Benefits of Exercising with Type 1 Diabetes

When it comes to managing type 1 diabetes, nutrition and exercise are extremely influential in how the disease exists in our lives. While our food choices are without a doubt the most influential, exercise has a great impact on our overall quality of life with the disease. Consistent movement of the body will allow for a much more flexible, liberated lifestyle with type 1 diabetes. The effects of exercise on blood glucose levels are great, they can allow someone to eat more freely, use less insulin and feel more in control of all aspects of life. Type 1 diabetes has the ability to take away a lot of power from a human, including the power to feel comfortable and in control while moving. Mastering and integrating exercise into one's life while living with type 1 diabetes is a choice with very few, if any, negative repercussions.

Why Exercising with Type 1 Diabetes Is Important

When the body moves, amazing things happen. The heart gets stronger, muscles get bigger, brain function improves, and most importantly (in relation to diabetes that is,) insulin sensitivity gets much better. This means the cells that carry and transform insulin throughout the body (insulin receptor cells) are more open and efficient at using the insulin being administered by injection or insulin pump. The same effects occur in a body without diabetes, but since insulin is still made in a functioning pancreas, the change would go unnoticed. Because exercise allows the body to use insulin more effectively, the body will require less of it and also use it faster, which means fewer high blood sugar episodes and more flexibility with eating.

How to Get Started

It’s important to consult with your diabetes team before jumping into an exercise routine. Because exercise has such a great effect on blood glucose levels, it makes the possibility for variation much bigger when starting out. The chance of having a low blood glucose episode is much greater and is something that needs to have an eye kept on. Keeping track of your movement and glucose readings before, during and after the activity is great information to gather so that eventually, there isn’t any guessing when it comes to glucose levels around that activity.

Try out a couple of different forms of movement when starting out and find something that you enjoy that can be integrated into your lifestyle. All forms of exercise are valid and effective in making diabetes easier to manage. It’s useful to note that different types of exercise such as cardio versus weight training versus HIT will all have different implications on when and how they affect blood glucose levels. So, it will take time to really figure out how your diabetes reacts with different types of movement. In the end, the payoff and knowledge will be invaluable.

How to Maintain a Routine

Exercising with type 1 diabetes is most effective on blood glucose levels when done regularly. When exercise is

only done sometimes, it can actually be really confusing on the body and have unclear and negative effects on blood glucose levels. This is why it’s important to get into a routine. Getting into a good routine can take a couple of months. In my experience, it’s best to find a workout that you enjoy! There are so many ways to move the body; I personally do four workouts a week and switch between running, biking, dancing and lifting weights! I found that doing a different exercise each day kept me much more excited and made me enjoy it more.

Now, I know exactly how to adjust my insulin before, during and after my workouts. I find the effects of my workouts last almost 48 hours, which is why I do one every other day! For all my cardio workouts, I greatly reduce or completely stop my insulin a little before and during. If I have to, I will even have a snack before as well. For weights, I personally have to increase my dose as the adrenaline increases my glucose levels! This is something I discovered through collaborating with my diabetes team as well as lots of personal trial and error. It's important to do the same with your routine — talk to your diabetes team, be extremely cautious with insulin adjustments when starting out and do your best to keep yourself accountable! It’s incredibly important to check with your medical team before making any significant changes to your routine.

As you can see, there are a variety of reasons why exercising with type 1 diabetes is a great idea. Some mentioned are increased insulin sensitivity, more freedom and flexibility in lifestyle, and improved relationship with the disease itself to name a few. At the end of the day, our lives are our choices and are choices decide the course of our lives. Everyone deserves the best quality of life, even though sometimes it can be hard to get motivated when the reason for doing something is because of chronic illness. Try to enjoy the process, take control of your body, and show diabetes that it won’t hold you back from accomplishing anything you set your mind to.