

# Disability Insight

**Diabetes Awareness Day**

Take a look around you  
**30<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

## Key points

- Diabetes is a long-term condition that affects at least 90,000 people in Northern Ireland.
- The number of people with diabetes is increasing: since 1996, it has more than doubled.
- Type 1 diabetes is not caused by lifestyle choices. Type 2 diabetes is often linked to being overweight; genes also play a role. Type 2 diabetes is more common than Type 1 (about 90% to 10%).

## 1 About Diabetes

Diabetes is a lifelong condition that causes a person's glucose (sugar) level in the blood to become too high. There are two forms of diabetes: Type 1 (affecting about 10% of people living with diabetes) and Type 2 (about 90%).

### Type 1 diabetes:

- Type 1 is caused by the body's immune system attacking the insulin producing cells in the pancreas. The body no longer produces insulin and glucose levels rise.
- Most people with Type 1 diabetes are diagnosed at an early age, usually as an acute condition, but diagnosis as an adult is possible.
- Treatment with insulin injections or a pump is always required. A healthy diet and keeping active are also important. There is no cure for Type 1 diabetes.
- Its cause is not known but research suggests that it has nothing to do with lifestyle. It is thought that there may be several causes with a genetic link in some people. Recent research shows that a common virus may trigger the body's immune system to attack its own insulin producing pancreatic cells.

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**Type 2 diabetes:**

- In Type 2, the pancreas either produces not enough insulin or it is not used properly by the various organs in the body. Again, glucose levels get too high.
- Type 2 occurs mainly in people over the age of 40 although with the rise in obesity more children are now developing Type 2 diabetes.
- It can remain undiagnosed for several years during which time the blood glucose levels are too high. This can cause some of the complications of diabetes.
- It is treated with a healthy diet, exercise and quite often medication. On average, people with Type 2 diabetes start to take insulin 7 years after diagnosis.
- There is a tendency for Type 2 diabetes to run in families but a sedentary lifestyle and being overweight can also be causes. So for many people it is preventable or can be delayed.

**2 How does Diabetes affect someone's life?**

People with diabetes need to manage their condition on a daily basis. This may involve taking medication at the right time and regularly testing blood glucose levels. Some people with diabetes do not see themselves as having a disability. Others may experience complications, affecting for example:

- **The eyes:** Diabetes can affect the blood vessels at the back of the eye and this can lead to visual impairment or blindness.
- **The heart and vascular system:** Diabetes can make people more susceptible to heart disease and stroke. It can also cause blood clots in the vessels in the legs which may result in amputation.
- **The kidneys:** Diabetes can affect the kidneys resulting in damage or kidney failure.
- **The nerves:** Diabetes may cause nerve damage. The most common form of nerve damage is in the extremities leading to pain or loss of sensation in the feet and ulceration of the legs. Again this can lead to amputation.

Diabetes may not just affect the individual's lifestyle, but can also have an impact on their emotions, relationships, work and hobbies. To read and listen to people tell their own story of living with diabetes click on any of the links below:

[www.diabetes.org.uk/your-stories/Harini-zest-for-living](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/your-stories/Harini-zest-for-living)

[www.diabetes.org.uk/your-stories/kate-own-your-diabetes](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/your-stories/kate-own-your-diabetes)  
[www.diabetes.org.uk/your-stories/Rob-determined-long-healthy-life](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/your-stories/Rob-determined-long-healthy-life)  
[www.diabetes.co.uk/real-life-stories/peter-shaw.html](http://www.diabetes.co.uk/real-life-stories/peter-shaw.html)

### **3 Supporting someone with Diabetes in work**

You can support a member of staff or a colleague with diabetes by:

- Understanding how stable their condition is and how well they manage it – for most people, diabetes doesn't make any difference to their ability to do their job and many people don't need any adjustments.
- Allowing regular meals or medication to be built into working patterns and providing flexibility.
- Providing access to a private and clean room to check blood sugar levels and for sharps disposal.
- Having a first aider who is trained in supporting people with diabetes.

In most circumstances, people with diabetes are able to recognise the symptoms of hypoglycaemia (when the blood sugar level gets too low) and treat it. But Diabetes UK advise that colleagues being aware of the symptoms of a 'hypo' – such as trembling, shakiness, sweating, paleness, palpitations, a fast pulse or confusion – and what to do if someone becomes unconscious – putting the person into recovery position, giving a glucagon injection or if necessary calling an ambulance – can make a difference.

If you manage somebody with diabetes it is important to explore with them whether they need any support or reasonable adjustments, for example:

- Having an emergency hypo box containing hypo treatments in the workplace.
- Providing aids and adaptations if required, such as text enhancing software for visual impairments.
- Contacting Access to Work (an employment support programme) for support, for example with travel to work if they have lost their driving license due to diabetes (but be aware that having diabetes does not automatically mean that someone will need to give up driving).

Occupational Health and Human Resources may be able to advise you. Also be aware:

- A person with diabetes may take longer to recover from an illness as they need to manage both their diabetes and the illness. This is because blood glucose levels naturally rise when we are ill and our body fights the illness.
- Women with diabetes who are pregnant often need to attend more appointments and scans than pregnant women without diabetes.

#### **4 Support for you if you care for somebody with Diabetes**

If your child has been diagnosed with diabetes, Diabetes UK provide a range of information and support services. Find out more from their website:

[www.diabetes.org.uk/Guide-to-diabetes/Your-child-and-diabetes/](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Guide-to-diabetes/Your-child-and-diabetes/)  
[www.diabetes.org.uk/In Your Area/N Ireland/NI-Parent-Peer-Support](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/In_Your_Area/N_Ireland/NI-Parent-Peer-Support)

Diabetes.co.uk, an online community of people with diabetes, families, friends, and carers, offer further advice on how you can best help. They point out that this is likely to vary depending on how your friend, relative or partner views their own diabetes: [www.diabetes.co.uk/supporting-someone-with-diabetes.html](http://www.diabetes.co.uk/supporting-someone-with-diabetes.html)

#### **5 Support for you if you have Diabetes**

Information is available from your local healthcare team and the NHS Choices website: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/type-1-diabetes/living-with/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/type-1-diabetes/living-with/) and [www.nhs.uk/conditions/type-2-diabetes/living-with/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/type-2-diabetes/living-with/). Diabetes UK have produced a wide range of information materials, including on living with diabetes and the support services they offer: [www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes) and [www.diabetes.org.uk/How we help](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/How_we_help). Likewise, they provide dedicated information and support for people who have newly been diagnosed:

[www.diabetes.org.uk/Newly-diagnosed-with-diabetes/](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/Newly-diagnosed-with-diabetes/)

#### **Sources and further reading**

[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes/Pages/Diabetes.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Diabetes/Pages/Diabetes.aspx)

[www.diabetes.org.uk/](http://www.diabetes.org.uk/)

[www.hscboard.hscni.net/diabetes-network/](http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/diabetes-network/)

[www.diabetes.co.uk/](http://www.diabetes.co.uk/) a health platform and patient-support network

[www.drwf.org.uk/](http://www.drwf.org.uk/) Diabetes Research and Wellbeing Foundation

[jdrf.org.uk/](http://jdrf.org.uk/) Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation

# Disability Insight

Take a look around you



Northern Ireland  
Blood Transfusion Service

Northern Ireland  
Social Care Council

Patient and Client Council  
Your voice in health and social care

NIPEC



The Regulation and  
Quality Improvement  
Authority

Northern Ireland  
mdta  
Medical & Dental Training Agency

NICALA  
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency  
*a voice for children*

SBNI  
Safeguarding Board  
for Northern Ireland



Public Health  
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