

Helping people with diabetes get active



DIABETES UK
KNOW DIABETES. FIGHT DIABETES.



About Diabetes UK

We're Diabetes UK. Because diabetes is relentless, so are we. For more than 85 years we've discovered new treatments, fought life-changing campaigns and been there for people just like you, whenever you need us, however you need us. Now we're leading the way to a world where diabetes can do no harm. Your support will get us there sooner.

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Authors: Neil Gibson and Daniel Howarth
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A word from our Chief Executive



Getting active and staying active can help everyone living with diabetes to manage their condition.

We want to provide practical solutions so everyone with diabetes can be as active as possible and enjoy the benefits this brings. This includes those with serious complications, as well as the 12.3 million people at risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Through working in partnership with Sport England, we can help millions of people take up physical activity and lead full and healthy lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Askew'. The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Chris Askew
Chief Executive, Diabetes UK

About this booklet

Does your work support physical activity, health and fitness?

If you're professionally involved in promoting an active lifestyle, like managing a gym or working in public health, this booklet's for you.

We've created it to:

- 1 Raise awareness** of the issues people living with diabetes have with physical exercise.
- 2 Encourage everyone** who can make a difference to help people with diabetes become more active.

Our work with Sport England

We're the leading charity for people living with diabetes in the UK. Our vision is a world where diabetes can do no harm.

We've partnered with Sport England to help encourage people with diabetes, and those at risk of developing it, to exercise more and lead full and healthy lives.

We received National Lottery funding from Sport England to carry out a 12-month research project that looked at how people living with diabetes feel about getting active. This insight will help guide our day-to-day work and has already shaped our new 2020–2025 strategy.

Over the next few pages, you'll find our key findings from the research, together with some practical suggestions on how you can encourage people with diabetes to become more active.

Our new strategy puts physical activity at the centre of achieving our vision to 'help people with diabetes live better and more confident lives, free from discrimination.'

Diabetes and physical activity: how does it help?



The benefits of physical activity can be huge for everyone. It can dramatically improve people's quality and even length of life. And it all starts with making some simple changes.

By getting active, people with diabetes can manage their condition and keep complications such as strokes, sight loss, amputations, heart and kidney disease and mental health issues at bay.

Those at risk of getting type 2 diabetes can also reduce their risk of developing it, just by doing physical exercise.

But to help inspire people with diabetes to lead a more active lifestyle and enjoy all the related health benefits, it's important we understand the factors that can prevent them from making a positive change, as well as identifying the things that motivate them to do so.

Diabetes affects more people than all cancers and dementia combined.

- **4.7 million** people with diabetes in the UK
- **12.3 million** people at risk of type 2 diabetes
- **Every 2 minutes** someone learns they have diabetes
- **5 million** people may have diabetes by 2025

Why is staying active so tough?

Many people struggle to stick to an exercise regime for all sorts of reasons – whether they have diabetes or not.

Top 10 exercise turn-offs

- 1 Work-life balance – not having the time due to work or other commitments.
- 2 Location – having to travel too far.
- 3 Cost – not being able to afford the gym or leisure centre.
- 4 Mindset – not feeling motivated enough or having the willpower to stick with a routine.
- 5 Medical conditions – having more than one medical condition to factor in.
- 6 Health-related issues – experiencing breathing problems, low fitness levels or reduced mobility when exercising.
- 7 Embarrassment – being fearful of failure or self-conscious about exercising in public.
- 8 Weather – not wanting to go out if it's cold, dark or rainy.
- 9 Resources – not having the right equipment, clothing or transportation.
- 10 Knowledge and guidance – not being aware of the importance of physical exercise or how to find out more about it.

Now let's take a look at why people with diabetes are motivated to exercise and the barriers that can stop them in their tracks.



How people living with diabetes feel about exercise



What we've learned

We found three key areas that are especially helpful and relevant for exploring the relationship that people with diabetes have with exercise.

- 1 **Education and awareness-raising**
- 2 **Social and psychological support**
- 3 **Hypoglycaemia**

Let's explore what we discovered in these areas in more detail, along with some suggestions you might find useful when thinking about how you approach these issues in your professional or volunteer work.

1 Education and awareness-raising

Key insight

People want to learn more about diabetes and exercise, but the hunger for information is generally far greater than what's available.

- The desire for more information comes from all sides. People working in health and fitness, healthcare professionals and people with diabetes all want more information about physical activity and diabetes.
- Many people with diabetes say they don't know where they can go to get active.
- Healthcare professionals are seen as inconsistent or inaccurate with their advice on physical activity, despite being trusted more generally.
- People with diabetes overwhelmingly prefer to take exercise advice from trusted sources such as Diabetes UK and fitness instructors.
- Diabetes education courses could feature more physical activity content, despite generally being seen as useful.
- People with diabetes tend to prefer advice and information that's individually tailored to them.

How you can help

- 1 Offer training programmes or apps. that are specially tailored for people with diabetes.
- 2 Make sure that all your activities are widely available and accessible.
- 3 Advertise what you're doing to raise awareness within the local community.





2 Social and psychological support

Key insight

People living with diabetes are much more likely to be active if they have social and psychological support.

- Being accompanied by a friend or family member can be a really motivating source of support.
- Connecting with others facing similar challenges helps overcome the feeling that they're different or special.
- Intensive, individually-tailored support is the most effective way to get people with diabetes to start being active.
- Improving access to psychological and podiatry support services would also help.

How you can help

- 1 Recommend that a friend or family member comes along for extra support and reassurance.
- 2 Offer fitness classes just for people with diabetes.
- 3 Provide extra psychological and podiatry support if needed.

3 Hypoglycaemia

Key insight

People with diabetes often doubt if it's worth exercising due to the risk of a hypo.

- The biggest barrier to exercise from those with type 1 diabetes is fear of hypoglycaemia.
- Many parents say they feel anxious about their children being physically active because they may get a hypo.
- People with diabetes can think there's no point in exercising if they have to eat more carbohydrates to counteract a hypo.

How you can help

- 1 Get informed about what a hypo is, and how to spot the warning signs.
- 2 Keep plenty of fast-acting, hypo-friendly carbohydrates like sugary drinks and glucose tablets to hand, just in case. A hypo kit will help reassure people with diabetes that they'll be ok, even if they forget their usual treatment.

Want more info?

Our website www.diabetes.org.uk has all you need to know about hypos, including the signs and symptoms, treatment and what to do if someone has a severe episode.

What causes a hypo?

We don't always know why hypos happen, although they're often caused by blood glucose levels dipping too low. Episodes can happen to anyone living with diabetes, no matter how well they manage their condition. But it's fair to say that some things make a hypo more likely.

These include:

- Missing meal or snack times.
- Not eating enough carbohydrates.
- Exercising without topping up on carbohydrates or reducing insulin dosage.
- Taking more insulin (or other diabetes medication) than needed.
- Drinking alcohol on an empty stomach.



Our research was based on...

- A literature review on the barriers and motivators to physical activity for people with diabetes, which included 35 studies.
- Interviews with over 200 people with diabetes at 15 local diabetes groups. There were also in-depth interviews with three healthcare professionals.
- An online survey for people with diabetes, which 934 people completed.
- Three different focus groups carried out by Sheffield Hallam University. There were 15 people with type 1 diabetes, 16 with type 2 diabetes and 16 healthcare professionals.
- An online survey for healthcare professionals, which was completed by 38 people.
- Brunel University analysing three separate focus groups made up of 12 people with type 1 diabetes, 13 with type 2 diabetes and 16 healthcare professionals.



References

Diabetes UK. (2019). *Us, Diabetes and a lot of facts and stats*. Retrieved from: https://www.diabetes.org.uk/resources-s3/2019-02/1362B_Facts%20and%20stats%20Update%20Jan%202019_LOW%20RES_EXTERNAL.pdfReferences

Where to find out more

Diabetes UK

Wells Lawrence House
126 Back Church Lane
London
E1 1FH

Tel: 0345 123 2399

www.diabetes.org.uk

Sport England


We Are Undefeatable is a national campaign to support people who live with one or more long-term health conditions in England.

www.sportengland.org/our-work/health-and-inactivity

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Get in touch

 0345 123 2399

 helpline@diabetes.org.uk

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www.diabetes.org.uk

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