

Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare: Diabetes- Dealing with Sick Days

Although no one plans it, everyone gets sick from time to time. The Fall and Winter months are the most common times of the year for illness, but it is good to be prepared at any time. The person with diabetes, like everyone else, will have minor illnesses such as colds, viruses, diarrhea, sore throats, menstrual cramps, and infections.

Even a minor cold can make your diabetes harder to control. To understand how this happens, think of a minor illness as a stress. Stress usually raises the glucose (blood sugar) level. The person with diabetes works hard to balance food, activity (exercise), and medicine (insulin or pills). The added stress of a cold or the flu upsets this balance. Your usual diet, activity, and medicine are then less effective in controlling the glucose level. Think about prevention, planning ahead, and being prepared for sick days. This will make them easier to manage!

Prevention

A good place to begin is to work on a plan to prevent illness. Use these guidelines:

1. Have an annual flu shot. These shots are available each fall and will help protect you from certain types of flu.
2. Take the pneumonia vaccine every 5 years. This shot will protect you from certain types of pneumonia. Talk with your doctor about the need for these shots.
3. Keep glucose levels in your "target range" (80-140 mg/dl). Watch for patterns of low or high glucose. Work with your doctor to change diet, exercise or diabetes medicines (insulin/oral agents) to keep your diabetes in good control. Many people find that they are more likely to get ill when their diabetes is out of control.
4. Drink 8-10 glasses of water each day.
5. Take all your medicines as prescribed. Do not skip or double up on any medicine unless you are advised by your doctor.
6. Treating an illness in its early stages may prevent it from getting worse. Report signs or symptoms of illness or infection early to your doctor.
 - Fever for more than 24 hours
 - 101.5 degrees or rising fever
 - Nausea
 - Vomiting
 - Diarrhea
7. Always wear some form of medical identification. A bracelet is the best choice, since it can be easily seen. Another good idea is to carry an ID card in your wallet. Place it next to your driver's license.

Remember, this medical identification **speaks** for you if you are not able to!

Preparing for Sick Days

1. Keep at least a week's worth of diabetes supplies on hand.
 - Glucose strips and/ or Continuous glucose monitor (CGM) supplies
 - Lancets
 - Diabetes medicine (oral, insulin, or injectible)
 - Ketostix (if Type 1 diabetes)
 - Glucagon injection (if Type 1 diabetes)
 - Insulin pump supplies
2. If you do not already have a "sick day meal plan", make an appointment with your doctor or diabetes educator to make an individualized plan.

Stock your kitchen with soft and liquid foods that can be used in your "sick day" meal plan.

Some good choices include:

- Jell-o and pudding (sugar-free and regular)
 - Bouillon cubes and broth soups
 - Regular soda (Coke, Sprite, Ginger Ale, etc.)
 - Diet soda (Diet 7-up, Diet Pepsi, etc.)
 - Saltine and graham crackers
 - Hot cereals (Cream of Wheat, etc.)
 - Hot chocolate (regular and sugar- free)
 - Popsicles (regular and sugar- free)
 - Tea bags
3. Check the supplies in your medicine cabinet. Keep the following on hand:
 - Thermometer
 - Antacid
 - Aspirin
 - Tylenol
 - Diarrhea medicine
 - Sugar free cough syrup/lozenges
 - Rectal suppositories for nausea
 - Glucagon (for severe low sugar - Type 1 Diabetes)

Talk with your doctor, diabetes educator, or pharmacist for help in choosing over-the-counter products. Remember, many of these products have sugar, alcohol and other drugs. These can raise both your glucose levels and blood pressure.

4. Make a list of the following phone numbers. Keep this list by the phone for quick and easy use. Include these numbers:
 - Doctor's office number
 - Pharmacy / pharmacist
 - Family member (in town, home / work numbers)
 - Friend / neighbor
 - Local hospital emergency room
 - Diabetes educator

Sick Day Plan

Now that you have reviewed how to prevent and plan ahead for sick days, it is time to review what to do when you become ill. At the first sign of illness, begin using your sick day plan. Remember, even a minor illness or stress can lead to a diabetes emergency that may require hospitalization.

You may also want to put your sick day plan into use for: Oral surgery, Tests/Procedures, X-rays (stomach, bowel), Dental Work / Tooth removal, Outpatient surgery

Your prompt action can and will make a difference. These sick day guidelines will help you.

- 1. Check your glucose more often** (at least every four hours). Aim to keep your glucoses <200 mg/dl. There may be times when you will need to check your glucose hourly. Record all your glucose levels. Keep this record by the phone so you are ready to share it with your doctor.
- 2. If you have Type 1 diabetes, check your urine ketones** (use Ketostix-foil wrapped strips) every time you urinate. Record these results in your glucose record. Talk with your nurse or doctor if you do not know how to check your ketones.

- 3. NEVER stop taking your insulin or oral agents.** Take your usual dose(s) unless your doctor has told you differently.

When ill, you may need more diabetes medicine to keep your glucose under control. Some people wrongly believe that because they are ill and eating less, they need little or no medicine. High glucoses can lead to a diabetes emergency. You may need more insulin or extra shots when ill. Your body sees the illness as a stress and usually more medicine (insulin/oral agent) is needed to control diabetes.

- 4. Eat frequent small meals** (every 2 to 3 hours). **You need to eat the same amount of carbohydrate that you normally do. Use soft and liquid foods.** These may be more easily tolerated by your stomach. If you have nausea or vomiting, change from your usual diet to your sick day meal plan.

Your prompt action can and will make a difference. These sick day guidelines will help you.

If you are vomiting:

- Stop taking fluids for one hour. This will let your stomach rest.
- Take a suppository for nausea. If nausea happens often, talk with your doctor about getting a prescription for use at home.
- Rest in a reclining chair. Do not lay flat.
- **After one hour**, try small sips of regular 7-up or Sprite over ice chips every 10-15 minutes.
- If vomiting continues for 4 or more hours, call your doctor or go to the Emergency Room.
- If your blood glucose is higher than 240 mg/dl, you need to drink sugar-free, caffeine-free liquids and you may need to take some extra insulin. Your doctor or health care team will give you instructions when you call.

5. Drink more fluids when ill. Loss of body fluids (dehydration) can be a serious problem when you have a fever, diarrhea or vomiting. Weigh yourself everyday when ill to see if you are losing weight. This may be a sign of dehydration.

***Drink 4 to 6 ounces (1/2 to 1/3 cup) of sugar free liquids every hour.** Sugar-free fluids include water, ice chips, coffee, tea and broth. Use **sugar-free fluids if your glucose is 240 mg/dl or higher.** Take small sips of fluids or suck on ice chips if you are nauseated. Try to drink 12 eight-ounce glasses of liquid each day.

***If you cannot eat your usual diet or soft foods and your glucose is below 240 mg/dl, use liquids with sugar** such as 7-up, Sprite, tea with honey, Kool-Aid, etc. This will help you get some calories with your fluids. Write down of the fluids and amounts you are taking in.

6. Keep a list of how you are feeling. Write down your signs and symptoms on your Sick Day Record. Be ready to share this information with your doctor.

- **Temperature:** Current temperature? Presence of fever? How long? How high? Use of aspirin/Tylenol?
- **Vomiting:** How many times? How long since you have last vomited? Have you been able to eat/drink anything? Have you taken any medicine for vomiting/nausea?
- **Cough:** Are you coughing up yellow or green mucous? Do you use cough syrup or lozenges?
- **Diarrhea:** How many times? How long since last episode? Use of anti-diarrhea medicine?
- **Ketones:** Do you have moderate or large ketones in your urine?

7. Call your doctor early in the illness. Together you can work to relieve symptoms and control your glucoses. If you are unable to reach your doctor by phone, call or go to the nearest emergency room. This is very important if you have been vomiting or have had diarrhea for 4 or more hours.

Call your doctor if you have:
Glucoses >240 for more than one day
Moderate - large ketones for two or more tests
Vomiting or diarrhea for four or more hours
Severe pain of any kind
Fever more than 100 degrees
If you are unsure what to do

If you live alone, call a family member or close friend. Let them know you are at home and sick. **Set up a calling system so you are in touch by phone every 2-4 hours.** Sometimes you may not realize how ill you are. You may need someone to come to stay with you.

8. Stay at home and get plenty of rest. Do not risk your health or the health of others by going to work ill. One or two days of rest at the start of an illness may prevent the loss of several days work later on.

9. DO NOT exercise when you are ill. Postpone exercise until you are well.