

Making the Most of Your Medications

This is the fourth in a series of four handouts that you will get from the Nova Scotia Diabetes Assistance Program.

Other handouts in the series include:

1 **Healthy Living and Self-Care**

2 **You and Your Blood Sugars**

3 **Staying Well with Diabetes**

Why do I need medications?

When you have diabetes, medications help to control your blood sugars (glucose). Keeping your blood sugars near normal will reduce the risk of complications from diabetes such as eye, kidney, nerve, and heart disease.

Diabetes medications, including pills or insulin, help the body use the food we eat. Food provides us with energy to complete our daily activities, perform our best when we work or exercise, and to stay strong during times of stress and illness.

Diabetes pills

Diabetes pills used to treat diabetes are not insulin. These pills help your body make more of its own insulin or use its own insulin more effectively.

Insulin

Insulin can only be given by injection (needle). This injection gives your body the insulin it needs but cannot make itself.

Diabetes pills and insulin injections are not a cure for diabetes, but allow people to live healthy lives.

You may also be taking medication for other medical problems such as high blood pressure or a heart condition. All of these medications are very important. For these medications to do the best job possible, they need to be taken regularly as advised by your doctor.

Will my medications change?

Yes, quite likely. When you first develop diabetes, you may not need medication. Over time, this will change for most people.

- As we grow older and the longer we have diabetes, the more help our body will need to keep blood sugars in control.
- Taking a new medication such as insulin or more of the same medication does not mean you have failed at managing your diabetes. It does not mean your diabetes is any worse than the next person. Having the right amount of insulin improves blood sugars and helps you to feel better.
- The decision to add a new medication or increase the amount of your current medication is something you and your doctor should make together. These decisions can only be made if you see your doctor regularly to discuss your diabetes.

How will the doctor know if this is the best medication for me?

The doctor considers your type of diabetes, blood test results, new diabetes research, and what is presently happening in your life when choosing the best medication for you.

- When you see your doctor, make sure you share any signs or symptoms that you may be having as a result of your medications. Tell your doctor if you have skipped any medications.
- Always share the results of your home blood sugar tests. This will help your doctor decide if the medication you are taking is right for you. Too little medication will not keep blood sugars where they should be. Too much medication may make you feel unwell. It takes time for some medications to work their best.

Tips for using medications

- **See your doctor routinely** to review your medications. It might be time to add another or to increase the amount you need.
- **Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist** before taking any new medications.

Medications

- Know your medications. Ask yourself the following questions: Why am I taking it? What does it do? How do I know if it is working? How will it make me feel? What side effects may I expect? If you don't know the answers, ask!
- Never substitute one medication for another. Do not share medications.
- Report any side effects or symptoms to both your doctor and pharmacist.
- Always carry an updated list of your medications with you. Share this list with your doctor and other members of your diabetes team whenever you visit. Just ask your pharmacist to give you a complete list, and remember to update it regularly.
- Let your doctor know about any and all medications you are taking. This includes over-the-counter medications like cough syrup, herbs, vitamins, and minerals. Make sure you add these to your list!

Working with your pharmacist

- Use one pharmacy. This helps your pharmacist check for medication side effects and drug interactions. When some medications are taken together, they produce unexpected or harmful results.
- Know your pharmacist. You are more likely to ask questions if you know the pharmacist by name.
- Talk to your pharmacist about ways to remember when and how much of your medication you should take. Ask for directions in writing.

What to do about illness

When you are sick and unable to eat, it is important to take your diabetes medications. In fact, some illnesses may increase your blood sugar.

- Talk to your diabetes team about how to manage on sick days.
- If you are sick and unsure about what to do, call your doctor or diabetes team members.

Take care with alcohol

Drinking when you have diabetes can be very dangerous.

- Talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or other diabetes team member about how to drink safely.
- Alcohol can cause serious problems when taken with some medications. It can also increase the risk of low blood sugar when taken with insulin or some diabetes pills.

Where do I go to learn more about my diabetes?

Your doctor

Your doctor can refer you to a **Diabetes Centre** in your area. For the location of Diabetes Centres in Nova Scotia, visit the Diabetes Care Program of Nova Scotia website www.diabetescareprogram.ns.ca. This website will link you to other reliable diabetes websites.

Canadian Diabetes Association

The Nova Scotia Division of the Canadian Diabetes Association (**1-800-326-7712**) and their website (www.diabetes.ca) can direct you to valuable resources and information.

Your pharmacist

Your pharmacist will be happy to answer questions about diabetes, your meter, strips, and any medications you take.

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- The Canadian Diabetes Association
- The Pharmacy Association of Nova Scotia
- Nova Scotia's Diabetes Educators

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manage your diabetes