

# Diabetes (1)

When asked again this year if I would be willing to speak to you for the Fearfully and Wonderfully Made program, I must say as I said to last year's class: I can write about almost anything you throw at me, but speak? A completely different story! So please bear with me as my nose is pressed firmly into my paper and I read this instead of having it all memorized.

When I say the word diabetes a lot of you will recognize the word as being something that your grandparent, parent or quite possibly your sibling suffers from. There are 2 types of diabetes—Type 1 and Type 2. When talking diabetes, the one body organ affected by the disease is called the pancreas. The pancreas' job inside the body is one of the most vital to the body functioning properly. It produces a hormone called insulin. Insulin is the main “transporter” for every bit of sugar that enters your body. It carries it through your blood stream in order for your body to use it as energy. When you are without insulin, the sugar sits in your body with nowhere to go and this will lead to problems.

Type 2 diabetes is common in adults aged 50 years or older—although it can occur in children and adolescents. Being overweight and leading a non-active life style can also make a person at higher risk for developing Type 2 diabetes. Other factors could be family history and also race. Type 2 diabetes is the most prevalent form of the disease accounting for 90-95% of all cases in America. Most people with Type 2 are still able to produce insulin at diagnosis, but the insulin that is produced doesn't keep up with the sugar that is taken into the body. A lot of times what is used to maintain Type 2 diabetes is a healthier life style which includes eating healthy and also exercising. Because the body is still able to produce insulin, pills are usually taken to help with their own insulin's ability to work effectively. When this does not help, then insulin injections are needed.

I'm here today to speak to you about Type 1 diabetes. It's a disease that I've had now for about 30 years of my life. I'll give you a brief “scientific” instruction of it but most of this speech will be from a personal aspect of having this disease.

We Type 1 diabetics are often quite jealous of the Type 2 ones. When you have Type 2 there's a possible chance that it is preventable—whereas for us Type 1s? We had no choice, no way of preventing it and really now, there's no way of knowing if a person will get it or not.

Back when I was diagnosed it was a disease known as juvenile diabetes because most often it was diagnosed in children. But that is not always the case now. There have

been many people affected by Type 1 diabetes in their late teens and early adult life as well. The cause for Type 1 diabetes isn't quite known yet but some say it's due to genetics and it takes an environmental trigger or series of triggers (such as a virus, toxin or drug) to set the autoimmune process in motion to destroy the pancreas' cells that produce insulin.

When you are diagnosed with Type 1 you are automatically put on insulin injections because your pancreas produces no insulin at all. Your shots mainly take the form of an "artificial" pancreas.

Around the age of 3 and a half I started showing symptoms that didn't seem quite right with my mom. I was constantly drinking, tired all the time, moody, loosing weight, loosing hair and going to the bathroom all the time. My mom took me from doctor to doctor and each one saying the same thing: "It's her age." I showed all the symptoms of having the disease but because doctors back then thought that Type 1 diabetes was an inherited disease and no one in my family had it, then there was no reason for me to be tested for it.

The doctor visits continued because my mom was convinced that something other than my age was going on. I was finally diagnosed on my 6th birthday, and from that point on I hated my disease. Being diagnosed on my birthday was the first way it "stole" my life from me. I had so many plans for that day—I turned 6! I was going to have a birthday party with cake and ice cream and presents! I had no time for a disease—I was on my way to kindergarten!

Because my disease went undetected for so long the sugar levels in my blood were outrageously high. When there's no insulin to help carry the sugar through the blood stream what ends up happening is that the sugar just sits. When it sits it starts causing significant damage to the body's organs and nerves.

For those of you that don't have the disease, your work is pretty easy—you eat what you want and your body does the rest. Your pancreas figures out how much sugar is there inside your body, it produces the right amount of insulin to take care of that sugar—and all this goes on without you feeling or even knowing about it.

I was put on shots from the very beginning and hated it. Not only were the shots a pain to get, but it was never quite right—the insulin was either too much or too little and to find the *exact* number took a pancreas—which I didn't have.

Another introduction to my life was blood testing. Blood testing is one of the ways a person can know what the sugar level is inside the body and this will in turn let us know how much insulin to give ourselves to help that sugar maintain a normal

number. A normal blood reading is 60-120. When I was first diagnosed my blood sugar number was well over 1000. Blood testing involves a simple finger prick and it registers into a machine to give you your blood glucose level (or in easier terms—blood sugar).

When I was first diagnosed they didn't have the machines they have today. In fact my mom had to take me into the doctor sometimes 3-4 times a week to get my blood sugar tested because at-home meters weren't available. A few months though after my diagnosis, we were given our first "at home meter." Today's models are small and compact—almost as small as a credit card and as thick as a half a deck of cards. My first meter was the size of a Psalter and just as thick. Blood testing was never a "love" of mine, I don't remember really hating it so much as a kid but as I grew it became a constant irritation.

Another change in my life because of the disease was my diet. Thirty years ago sugar was *taboo*—I couldn't eat it much less look at it. And to have 2 brothers who didn't have it and were able to eat anything and everything while I was stuck with fruit or veggies? Yeah, that didn't help make me love this disease more than I already hated it.

Science has come a long ways since 1980. Since then the insulin pump has been invented. This is a machine that is attached to you and deposits insulin slowly into your system sporadically throughout the day. It takes on the role that the pancreas would take in "producing" the insulin, but you still have to watch blood sugars as that was also the pancreas' job to do.

Another added bonus about the work in science is that we diabetics can basically have whatever we want to eat. You can't imagine the sheer joy in this giant step! I *finally* was given the green light to eat cake! The only thing is that you constantly have to watch what you put in your mouth—making sure that you keep an eye on the sugar (more importantly the carbohydrate) content and calculate how much insulin you will need to take to cover that amount of sugar.

The things I have to deal with as a diabetic are continuous. Daily life includes: blood testing (up to 10-12 times each day), insulin injections (about 6 times each day) and a constant monitoring of what I put in my mouth and calculation to how much insulin this would require me to take. Diabetes is a constant monitoring game. You are aware of how you are feeling at *all* times and if you are feeling a little "off" then bells start going off "are my sugars high? Are they low?"

Low blood sugars are pretty easy for the "public" to spot. You start sweating, shaking and acting a bit strange. Low blood sugars usually happen when the body has too much of the insulin but not enough sugar for the insulin to attach itself to. I've had my

fair share of “interesting” low blood sugar reactions, one of which happened while shopping at Meijers. As I was walking down the bulk food aisle I could tell that something just wasn’t right. I started having a hard time focusing on things and couldn't figure out why I was where I was at and what I was doing there. While passing the bins of candy, I grabbed a scoop knowing that I needed sugar. Then things started fading in and out and the next thing I knew I was karate kicking the end aisle for some unknown reason. Now to most passers-by it would look as if I were completely off my rocker. But a lady took me in her arms and gently guided me to the floor where I passed out. Thankfully she was a wife of a firefighter and knew the signs and symptoms of a low blood sugar.

*(to be concluded in the next issue)*