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. The person with diabetes, like everyone else, will have minor illnesses such as:

- Colds
- Viruses
- Diarrhea
- Flu
- Sore throats
- Infections
- Menstrual cycles
- Sun burns

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

Prevention

Use these guidelines to help you create a plan to prevent illness:

1. **Get a flu (influenza) vaccine each year.** These shots are available each fall and help to protect you from certain types of flu.
   
   Talk with your doctor to find out if one or both pneumococcal vaccines (PCV13, PPSV23) are recommended for you. These vaccines protect you from certain types of pneumonia.

2. **Keep blood sugar levels in your “target range”** (80 to 130 mg/dl fasting). Watch for patterns of high or low blood sugar. Work with your doctor to change your diabetes medicines (insulin, oral), diet, and exercise 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.

3. **Drink at least eight, 8-ounce glasses of liquid each day.**

4. **Take all of your medicines as prescribed.** Do not skip or double up on any medicine unless you are advised to do so by your doctor.

5. **Treat any illness in its early stages to prevent it from getting worse.** Report signs of illness or infection early to your doctor. These include:
   
   - A fever of more than 100.5 degrees F or 38 degrees C for more than 24 hours
   - Nausea
   - Vomiting
   - Diarrhea
6. **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 a wallet card that lists your:

- Name
- Address and phone number
- Doctor’s name and phone number
- All of the medicines you are taking
- A family member’s name and phone number

Place this card next to your driver’s license. Medical identification speaks for you when you are not able to.

### Preparing for sick days

1. **Keep at least a week’s worth of diabetes supplies on hand.** This includes:
   - Glucose test strips
   - Lancets
   - Alcohol swabs
   - Cotton balls
   - Diabetes medicines (insulin, oral)
   - Syringes or pen needles
   - Extra batteries for glucose meter or insulin pump
   - Ketostix (Type 1 diabetes)
   - Glucagon IM (intramuscular) injection emergency kit (Type 1 diabetes)
   - Insulin pump supplies (for pump users)

2. **If you do not already have a sick day meal plan, make an appointment with your dietitian 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:

   - Bouillon cubes and broth soups
   - Gelatin and pudding (sugar-free and regular)
   - Hot cereals like Cream of Wheat
   - Hot chocolate (sugar-free and regular)
   - Instant custard mix
   - Instant mashed potatoes
   - Popsicles (sugar-free and regular)
   - Saltine and graham crackers
   - Diet soft drinks like Diet 7UP, Diet Pepsi
   - Regular soft drinks like Coke, Sprite, Ginger Ale
   - Tea bags
   - Unsweetened fruit juices

3. **Check the supplies in your medicine cabinet.** Keep the following on hand:
   - Thermometer
   - Antacid
   - Aspirin
   - Tylenol
   - Blistex / Vaseline
- Kaopectate anti-diarrheal medicine
- Vaporizer / humidifier
- Sugar free cough syrup or lozenges
- Rectal suppositories (for nausea)
- Glucagon (for severe low sugar - insulin users)

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

4. **Make a list of the following phone numbers.** Keep this list by the phone for quick and easy use. Include:
   - Doctor’s office number
   - Pharmacy or pharmacist
   - Local family member
   - Friend or neighbor
   - Local hospital emergency room
   - Diabetes nurse

**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:
- Dental work
- Tooth removal
- Oral surgery
- Tests / procedures
- X-rays of stomach or bowel area
- Same day or outpatient surgery

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

1. **Check your blood sugar more often - at least every 4 hours.** Aim to keep your blood sugar under 200 mg/dl. There may be times when you will need to check your blood sugar hourly. Record all blood sugar 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 a foil wrapped strip, such as Ketostix, to check every time you urinate. Record these results in your **Blood Sugar Record**. Talk with your nurse or doctor if you do not know how to check your ketones.
3. **NEVER stop taking your diabetes medicine (insulin, oral).** Take your usual dose(s) unless your doctor has told you differently. When ill, you may need more diabetes medicine to keep your blood sugar under control. Some people wrongly believe that because they are ill and eating less, they need little or no medicine. High blood sugar 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) is needed to control diabetes.

4. **Follow your sick day meal plan:**
   - **Eat frequent small meals (every 2 to 3 hours).** You need to eat the same amount of carbohydrate that you normally do. Soft and liquid foods may be more easily tolerated by your stomach.
   - **Drink more liquids when ill.** Try to drink twelve, 8-ounce glasses of liquid each day. Take small sips of liquids or suck on ice chips if you are nauseated.
   
   A loss of body fluid (dehydration) and sodium and potassium (electrolytes) can cause serious problems when you have a fever, diarrhea, or vomiting. Weigh yourself everyday when ill to see if you are losing weight, and **drink liquids that contain sodium and potassium** to replace these minerals in your body. **Liquids high in sodium** include sports drinks like Gatorade and Powerade, club soda, tomato juice, broth, or bouillon. **Liquids high in potassium** include sports drinks, grapefruit juice, orange juice, or tomato juice.
   
   ‣ **Drink 4 to 6 ounces (½ to ¾ cup) of sugar-free liquids every hour if your blood sugar is 240 mg/dl or higher.** Liquids include water, ice chips, club soda, sports drinks, coffee, tea, and broth.
   
   ‣ **Drink 4 to 6 ounces (½ to ¾ cup) of liquids with sugar every hour if you cannot eat your usual diet or soft foods, and your blood sugar is below 240 mg/dl.** Liquids with sugar include 7UP, Sprite, tea with honey, and Kool-Aid for example. This will help you get some calories with your fluids.
   
   ‣ Write down your fluids and amounts you are drinking in your **Sick Day Record**.

   - **If you are vomiting:**
     
     ‣ **Stop drinking liquids for 1 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 lie flat.
     
     ‣ **After one hour,** try small sips of lemon-lime soda, such as 7UP or Sprite, over ice chips every 10 to 15 minutes.
     
     ‣ **If vomiting continues for 4 or more hours,** call your doctor or go to the Emergency Room.
5. **Keep a list of how you are feeling.** Write down your signs and symptoms in your *Sick Day Record*. Be ready to share this information with your doctor.

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

6. **Call your doctor early in the illness.** Together you can work to relieve symptoms and control your blood sugar. 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 are unsure of what to do or have:**
   - Blood sugar greater than 240 mg/dl for more than 1 day
   - Moderate or large ketones
   - Vomiting or diarrhea for 4 or more hours
   - Severe pain of any kind
   - Fever of more than 100.5 degrees F or 38 degrees C

7. 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 to 4 hours.** Sometimes you may not realize how ill you are. You may need someone to come and 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.

Although sick days do not happen often, the person with diabetes can learn how to manage them. Take time now to review your personal sick day plan. Being prepared to handle ill days and putting into action your own sick day plan is a good way to begin.

By following these sick day tips you may be able to avoid going to the hospital. You can make a difference. Your doctor, nurse, and dietitian can help you get started.