Living with Diabetes Caused by Kidney Transplant Anti-Rejection Medications

What is diabetes?

The full name for diabetes is diabetes mellitus.

Diabetes occurs when there is too much sugar in the blood. Sugar from food you eat and drink stays in your blood instead of going into your cells. Therefore the cells do not get the energy from the food you eat.

What is blood sugar?

You may know that many foods contain carbohydrates. After you eat carbohydrates, they break down into sugar in your body.

Your body needs sugar. Sugar gives you energy to do all the things you do each day. Your body needs sugar to help you:

- walk, move, work, play
- laugh, learn, think
- do all the other things you do

What does insulin do?

Insulin is a hormone made by the pancreas. The blood takes insulin and sugar all over your body. Your body uses insulin to move the sugar into the cells of your body. This is how your body gets the energy to move, think and do all the things you do.

When you have diabetes your body cannot use the insulin to move the sugar from the blood into the cells. The sugar stays in your blood. The amount of sugar goes higher and higher in your blood but your cells do not get the sugar they need. Your cells do not have energy they need so you may feel tired all the time.

What is diabetes caused by anti-rejection medication?

Some people get diabetes after a kidney transplant. This is caused by some anti-rejection medications you must take to keep your new kidney healthy and working. Anti-rejection medications are also called immunosuppressants.
Some names of anti-rejection medications that can make blood sugar go up are:

- prednisone
- tacrolimus
- cyclosporine
- sirolimus

**Can I stop taking the anti-rejection medication?**

No. You must always take the anti-rejection medications to help your new kidney work.

If you stop taking the anti-rejection medications, your body will reject the new kidney.

**What if my blood sugars are high?**

Your goal is to keep your blood sugars within your target levels. When your blood sugars are higher than your target levels you can damage your kidneys, blood vessels and other parts of your body.

**When you have diabetes, you need to learn how to manage it so you can avoid complications.**

**What is the treatment for high blood sugar?**

The treatment of high blood sugar includes:

- following a healthy eating plan and eating the right amount of food
- staying away from food high in sugar such as candy, pop, cake and cookies
- working with your doctor, diabetes nurse, dietitian and/or nurse practitioner to find the right amount of medication for you

**Will I have to take insulin?**

Your goal is to keep your blood sugars within the target level. Some people take:

- oral medication to control blood sugars
- insulin to control blood sugars
- both oral medications and insulin to control blood sugars
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Who will help me with taking insulin?

Your doctor, diabetes nurse and/or nurse practitioner helps choose the right insulin for you. Insulin is given using an insulin pen. Insulin pens are easy to use and carry with you. Your diabetes nurse can show you how to give insulin.

Who will help me learn about my diet?

Your dietitian helps you learn about healthy eating. Your dietitian may give you a copy of Canada’s Food Guide and show you how to plan meals and snacks. This is based on your age, gender, health, activity level and other factors.

What feelings can I expect?

You have a new kidney. Most people are very happy to be free from dialysis and kidney disease.

After your kidney transplant you have been told that you have diabetes. This was caused by the anti-rejection medications you must take to keep your new kidney healthy. You may be in shock. You now have something else to deal with.

It is common to have mixed feelings about this. The doctors and nurses are here to help and support you. Your friends and family can also support you. Be honest and open about your feelings so we can find ways to help you cope and stay healthy.