

Worries about diabetes and its treatment

Information for children, young people and their parents/carers

It is quite common for children and young people to get worried about diabetes and their injections/finger pricks/set changes. Sometimes this is the case right from when they are diagnosed.

Often, over time, children and young people get used to living with diabetes and start to feel less worried. But sometimes a child/young person can seem fine for some time (even several years) but then seems to suddenly become anxious or worried about their diabetes and its treatment. This can sometimes be when they become old enough to fully understand what having a lifelong condition means, or when they become more aware of the differences between them and their friends.

- For children/young people who were already 'worriers' having diabetes can give them something extra to worry about.
- Being worried can make it difficult for children/young people to look after their diabetes as they can avoid testing/injections etc.
- Being worried can also sometimes come out as 'difficult' behaviour – often towards family at home who are the ones trying to encourage them with their diabetes care.
- It is important to remember that it is actually **quite normal to feel worried about having a lifelong health condition**. It is also **normal to feel a bit worried about getting injections or testing**.
- What can be tricky is when these worries get in the way of normal life or stop you/your child being able to look after their diabetes properly.

What can help?

Try to work out what the worry is about It is always helpful to talk to your child and explore their worries or anxiety.

- Is it that the injections are sore? (in which case there are several things the diabetes team can suggest to help).
- Are they worried about people seeing them doing their injections/finger pricks?
- Is it that doing their routine diabetes care makes them feel different or makes them miss out on socialising with their friends?
- Perhaps they are worried about their numbers and get nervous about what parents will say when they see high readings.
- Maybe the worries are about something totally non-related to diabetes (e.g. friendship issues at school, homework, tests, family issues etc).

It is quite easy to assume all difficulties are down to diabetes but sometimes they are just 'normal life'.

We find that **sometimes children/young people with diabetes tend to struggle with how they feel about their diabetes more at generally stressful times (e.g. when transitioning to high school, around exams)**.

Is there a practical solution?

Once you know what your child is worried about, you might be able to problem solve solutions with them, with the diabetes team or with school. (e.g. if a young person is worried about others seeing them do injections, schools can often allow them to use a private room, or if a young person is worried about missing out on social time with friends, schools can allow them to leave class early so that they can do their injection before lunchtime).

Understanding worry or anxiety

When we get worried or scared, the 'fight or flight' response kicks in and our body gets ready to either fight or run away. Although this was useful when we were cavemen living alongside sabre toothed tigers (as it allowed us to survive!), it can be less useful nowadays when the 'threat' is a maths test, going to a party or doing a set change.

There are several changes that occur in the body when we get worried/anxious:

- heart rate and breathing speed up so we can feel breathless
- more blood flows around the body so we can feel hot, sweaty or shaky
- less blood goes to the brain and stomach so we can feel lightheaded/ dizzy or a bit sick (butterflies in the tummy) or like we need to go to the toilet.

These physical feelings are all normal but can seem a bit scary themselves if we don't know what they are. They can also feel a bit like the symptoms of a hypo (so it is important to check BG levels). If we get worried about the physical feelings of being worried it can become a vicious cycle.



Simple ways to manage worry

- Reassure your child that it's normal to feel worried sometimes.
- **Encourage your child to talk** about their worries with you, another adult, or a friend.
- However, sometimes talking about worries a lot can make children feel even more anxious. If you feel your child is talking *too much* about their worries, it can be helpful to **set a limit on 'worry talk'** and agree to have a set amount of time to talk about the worries before then doing something else.
- Some children like to **write down their worries** about put them in a worry box.
- Avoid offering lots of reassurance (as this often doesn't work). Instead you can **encourage your child to come up with solutions themselves** (detective thinking) or to think about doing 'experiments' to find out what would happen (e.g. is it *likely* that X would happen?, have your friends ever actually said that?).
- Your child will look to you to see how you are feeling. It's helpful to show your child that you sometimes feel happy, sad, worried, or angry so that they learn that it's ok to have these feelings. However, if you feel very anxious yourself it's important to try and save your 'worry talk' for when your child is not around. Use your friends and family or seek support yourself in order to manage your anxiety.
- Keep a look out for your child avoiding things that make them feel worried or anxious (e.g. school, clubs, social situations, injections etc). It makes sense to avoid scary things as it makes us feel better in the short term. However, we know avoidance makes things harder the longer we

put it off as we never learn that we would have coped. Encourage your child to **'face their fear'**. The first time will be really hard, but the next time will be a bit easier (and so on). Try to show that you feel confident they can manage (even if you are also feeling anxious!).

- Encourage your child to get exercise and fresh air. Research has shown that this can help with mood and anxiety.
- Encourage your child to do fun things that they enjoy. Try not to get too bogged down in the worries.

Main techniques to practise together

Special breathing - encourage your child to take nice, calm, deep breaths: in through their nose and out through their mouth; in for the count of four, out for the count of four.

Relaxation - You can find fun relaxation exercises that your child can do every day to keep their general stress levels down. It is important to practise these regularly when your child is feeling calm (note –these usually won't work at the time when they are feeling particularly worried).



Happy place – ask your child to think of a (real or imagined) place where they feel happy and calm. Encourage them to imagine every detail of this place; what they can see, hear, feel, taste and smell. Then they can think of this place when they are feeling stressed or worried.

Positive self talk – encourage your child to make positive, coping statements e.g. “I can do this!”, “I have done this before”, “It will get easier every time I do it”.

Distraction – (or thinking about something else) is one of the best ways of reducing worried feelings. The best kinds of distraction need quite a lot of concentration to keep your mind busy and away from the worried thoughts. Here are some ideas:

- Counting backwards from 100
- Doing times tables or mental arithmetic
- Singing the lyrics to a favourite song or nursery rhyme
- Saying the alphabet backwards
- Trying to remember all the girls/boys names in your class at school
- Think of as many animals, names, foods, places etc as you can with different letters of the alphabet (e.g. B for animals – badger, buffalo, bird, bear, baboon).
- Looking around the room - count how many colours and different objects you can see in the room you are in (e.g. I can see 1 green chair, 3 white plugs sockets, 4 red chairs, 8 grey tables).

Hospital Passport

Every child coming to hospital is entitled to a Hospital Passport. Ask a member of the diabetes team if your child doesn't have one. It has packs of 'Bright Ideas' cards with strategies for managing worries.



Useful books

(these can be ordered through your local library)

Helping your child with a physical health condition: a self-help guide for parents by Bryony & Titman (2019).

The Huge Bag of Worries by Ironside (2004). - *Funny and reassuring story book for young children with anxieties.*

What to do when you're scared and worried by Crist (2004) - *For children aged 8-18.*

Helping your anxious child: A step by step guide for parents by Rappee (2009) - *Book for parents in how to help your child manage their worries.*

Overcoming your Child's Fears and Worries: A Self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques by Creswell & Willets (2007) - *For parents.*

Useful websites/apps

MoodJuice

Helps you think about emotional problems and work towards solving them:

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk



Calm – (Anxiety, Sleep, Relaxation)

Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music:

www.calm.com



Headspace – (Anxiety, Relaxation, Sleep)

Fun, engaging activities that teach mindfulness, including breathing exercises and visualizations:

www.headspace.com

