

Supporting Diabetes self-management during Covid-19

Clair Naughton Regional Development Officer with Diabetes Ireland and a Diabetes Nurse explores ways to support patients living with Diabetes to manage their condition a bit better.

Diabetes is a serious health issue with approximately 225,000 people living with the condition in Ireland, which poses a challenging problem for acute and community services especially now amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Acute services are required to provide care for all people with Type 1 diabetes and all complicated Type 2 cases, with the reminder of people with Type 2 diabetes getting routine care at community level. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought challenges for delivering diabetes care with the postponement/curtailment of routine medical appointments in both primary and secondary care and the redeployment of staff to cope with the pandemic response affecting all aspects of care delivery.¹

A person with Diabetes is in the 'at risk' group for Covid-19 having a 2-3 times increased risk of an adverse outcome if they develop it, with obesity and hypertension being additional risk factors.² The current evidence with Covid-19 and diabetes shows that a young person with well controlled Type 1 diabetes with no complications might do very well as compared to older people who have long-standing diabetes with multiple risk factors and poor glycaemic control having an increased chance of an adverse outcome if they contract it. There is an independent association between poor glycaemic control and adverse outcomes in Covid-19 and this highlights the importance of having optimal glycaemic control and good diabetes self-management.²

Being in the 'at risk' category for Covid 19 is a serious concern for people living with diabetes and consequently many patients are choosing to stay away from GP surgeries, community clinics or acute hospitals for fear of contracting the virus resulting in them missing out on much needed routine care and support. It is important that people with diabetes do not ignore or delay seeking medical treatment when necessary. Patients should be encouraged to contact their GP or diabetes specialist team as appropriate to discuss any issues, signs or symptoms that they may be concerned about to ensure they receive timely intervention

to prevent future diabetes related complications. It is important to advise and reassure patients of the measures and precautions that have been put in place in GP and hospital settings to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission.¹

As diabetes services are experiencing significant capacity issues at present, patients therefore may be waiting longer than usual for their next routine appointment.¹ In the interim period, it is vitally important that patients maintain good self-management of their diabetes. They may seek support from their community pharmacist or may require signposting to relevant resources to help deliver the key messages to promote diabetes self-management. It is essential that a person with diabetes looks after their long-term condition daily, so they are best protected in the event of any illness. Optimising glycaemic control requires daily decision-making regarding food choices, activity levels, taking medication and for many, there is a continuous struggle between hyperglycaemia and hypoglycaemia. As diabetes self-management is complex, a multifaceted approach to care is required to optimise treatment and offset any risks. This article will provide some sign posting for pharmacists in relation to healthy eating and physical activity so they can best advise those living with diabetes to manage their condition daily.

Healthy eating and regular physical activity are the cornerstones of Type 2 diabetes management. The key to eating well with Type 2 diabetes is eating regularly, having an awareness of serving sizes and following a healthy eating plan that is low in refined sugars, salt and fat. This means choosing lower fat options when eating meat, poultry, dairy products and spreads, enjoying a good variety of fresh vegetables, salads and fruit, having small portions of unrefined and whole grain starches (e.g. potatoes and wholegrain bread and cereals) and keeping high sugar, high fat/salt foods as treats only. Eating a wide variety of foods is the key to ensuring that one gets the nutrients they need. The "Healthy eating for people with Type 2 diabetes booklet" is an easy-to-read guide which has been



prepared specifically for people with Type 2 diabetes, however the booklet provides useful guidance for everyone interested in developing healthy eating habits. The booklet is downloadable from Diabetes Ireland website and hard copies can be ordered on www.healthpromotion.ie

Taking regular physical activity is also a very important part of managing diabetes as well as being important for physical and mental health. Benefits of physical activity include increased feeling of wellbeing, relieving stress, increased energy, promotes sleep, lowers blood glucose, cholesterol and blood pressure, helps with weight management, muscle strengthening, flexibility and balance, reduces insulin resistance and improves circulation. Individuals should be encouraged to increase/maintain their levels of physical activity whilst adhering to public health guidelines. While staying at home one should explore ways of keeping up their physical activity levels in the home and garden.

For those who are at risk of hypoglycaemia they should do some extra blood glucose checks before, during and after exercise to monitor the effect of exercise. They should be advised to carry carbohydrate and stop exercising immediately if they experience symptoms of hypoglycaemia. Wearing comfortable footwear while exercising is important and checking feet for broken skin and blisters is advisable. There are many additional resource for exercise available on www.diabetes.ie, www.healthpromotion.ie and www.getirelandactive.ie

The HSE developed a new information leaflet to support people living with a long-term health condition providing practical and clear information to support people to manage their long-term health condition and to stay well. It includes key messages supported by helpful tips and signposts to other resources

available at this time. For more information see www.hse2.ie

Patient supports from Diabetes Ireland

Diabetes Ireland, the National charity for people with Diabetes since 1967, are dedicated to providing support, education and motivation to everyone affected by diabetes. Services include:

- Helpline for general support and information Monday-Friday 9am-5pm telephone 01-842 8118 or email info@diabetes.ie
- CODE Structured patient education for Type 2 diabetes delivered via zoom
- Diabetes Smart online module
- Diabetes Ireland membership including an informative magazine published three times a year
- Diabetes Ireland Care Centres in Dublin & Cork offering Podiatry and footwear services.
- A wide variety of patient information literature, see downloads section on www.diabetes.ie
- Informative website www.diabetes.ie
- Support via social media (Facebook, Twitter)
- Patient education webinars



Structured patient education for Type 2 diabetes: Diabetes Ireland have a long-standing structured patient education programme for people with Type 2 diabetes and Pre-diabetes. The course is called CODE standing for Community Orientated Diabetes Education. Pre-COVID this was delivered in community group settings. In recent months, the course has been adapted so that it can be

facilitated online via the zoom platform. It is free to attend and supported by the HSE. The programme is facilitated by a Diabetes nurse or Dietitian and is delivered over 4 x 2 hour sessions. Group interaction and discussion is encouraged as all aspects of living with Type 2 diabetes are discussed. Participants get support from others living with Diabetes as they share their knowledge and experience of living with diabetes for the benefit of others in the group. For further information or to book a place on this education course individuals can register online or alternatively telephone Diabetes Ireland on 01-842 8118 or email: info@diabetes.ie



Diabetes Ireland also has an online diabetes education programme called "Diabetes Smart", which is designed to help people living with Type 2 diabetes and Pre-diabetes manage the condition in daily life. The programme is a 55 minute online series of videos, quizzes and visual tools that people can watch and participate in, from

the comfort of their own homes. **Diabetes SMART** is divided into 5 modules that explain:

- **Types of Diabetes** (5 minutes);
- **Healthy Eating** (20 minutes);
- **Exercise** (10 minutes),
- **Diabetes Medications** (10 minutes)
- **Associated Complications** (10 minutes).

Diabetes Smart provides practical information such as visuals of carbohydrate food portion sizes using everyday utensils to help identify correct portion sizes, tips to reduce portion sizes and advice on reading food labels and how to shop wisely. One can also check their starting fitness levels and be guided on the level of exercise that is recommended, view videos on warm-up exercises and identify barriers for exercise and ways to overcome those barriers. Diabetes Smart also includes information on medication, managing high and low blood glucose levels, how to avoid complications of Diabetes and information regarding a medical annual review. For more information see www.diabetes.ie

Diabetes Ireland and CarePlus Pharmacy partnership

In November of this year Diabetes Ireland joined with CarePlus Pharmacy to launch a unique

Sarah Collins, Pharmacist and Director of Operations, CarePlus Pharmacy



service to their customers living with diabetes. As a first step, all patients of CarePlus Pharmacy living with diabetes received an information pack with lots of advice on diabetes management plus information on Diabetes Ireland services when they collected their monthly prescription. In addition to this over the last number of months, Diabetes Ireland has worked with CarePlus Pharmacy to educate their employees about diabetes and have developed an app which will help pharmacy staff offer up to date advice to customers across a whole range of diabetes issues so pharmacy staff can signpost customers to other services as required. This initiative ensures that CarePlus Pharmacy patients living with Diabetes get support and information at a time that they may need it most.

References

1. Minding your long-term health condition during Coronavirus (Covid 19) available at <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/>

[primarycare/socialinclusion/travellers-and-roma/irish-travellers/minding-health-conditions-covid.pdf](https://www.primarycare/socialinclusion/travellers-and-roma/irish-travellers/minding-health-conditions-covid.pdf) (accessed 23/10/2020)

2. HSE Guidance for resumption of Diabetes Services during the Covid 19 pandemic 25/8/2020 (PDF download)
3. Covid 19 and Diabetes: the current evidence <https://diabetes.medicinematters.com/easd-2020/covid-19/diabetes-risk-factors/18410966> accessed 21 October 2020

News

Virtual workshop on healthcare quality improvement in Ireland

The learnings from a RCSI-led review of quality improvement studies in Ireland were shared at a recent workshop for quality improvement practitioners, educators, policy-makers, and patient and family representatives.

RCSI's Healthcare Outcomes Research Centre (HORC) was commissioned to undertake the scoping review by the HSE's National Quality Improvement Team. The RCSI Institute of Leadership (IoL) also collaborated on the study.

Examining published research from 2015-2020, the review recognises the role of quality improvement and health economics in the Irish health system. Workshop participants were invited to consider how the concept of 'value' may be incorporated further into quality improvement practice.

Speaking at the workshop, Professor Jan Sorensen, Director of the HORC, addressed the importance of data in achieving a good return on investment in quality improvement activity.

Professor Sorensen said, "Quality improvement comes with an investment cost, but if these projects result in resources being used more efficiently, then they will ultimately produce cost savings. Investing in quality improvement in one area, however, means that the same resources cannot be used to improve quality in other areas. Therefore it is important to consider where quality improvement is likely to have the largest pay-off, and make investments where the pay-off is believed to be highest."

Professor Sorensen added, "RCSI is committed to providing accessible platforms to share and create knowledge and discoveries to inform and influence key stakeholders to foster improvements in health. Stakeholder engagement workshops such as this are critical

Dr Siobhán McCarthy, RCSI

ways of ensuring that public policy in healthcare is co-created and research-informed."

The findings of the scoping review were presented by RCSI researchers Dr Siobhán McCarthy (IoL) and Dr Samira Barbara Jabakhanji (HORC). The research has been submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal and will be made publicly available at a later date.

The scoping review was led by Professor Sorensen. It was supported and funded by Dr Philip Crowley (HSE National Director for Quality Improvement), Dr Jennifer Martin (HSE Lead for QI Evidence) and Dr Maureen Flynn (HSE Lead for QI Connections).



Mr Eunan Friel, Director of RCSI Healthcare Management, commended the collaborative research approach incorporating both quality improvement and health economics as an important part of the University's research strategy.