

Managing your sick days



Diabetes
New Zealand

How can you manage diabetes when you are sick or when it's 'flu season? New Zealand registered dietitian **Alison Pask** gives us an insight into how to overcome winter blues.

Winter bugs: don't you dread the thought of catching the winter blues whether it is influenza, a head cold, sore tonsils or a chest infection?

Influenza is the most feared winter bug as it can play havoc with your diabetes control. It's a miserable experience, one you hope will pass quickly.

Not only do you need to ensure you get rid of the 'flu, you also need to pay particular care to your blood glucose. The biggest danger is going into ketoacidosis.

Ketones

Ketones are substances produced when the body breaks down fat for energy.

If you have diabetes, large amounts of ketones may signal *ketoacidosis*.

Your body burns fat for energy and produces substances called ketones. An excess production of ketones is the problem in diabetes.

Ketoacidosis occurs when abnormally great amounts of fat breakdown produce abnormally large amounts of ketones.

Ketoacidosis makes your blood too acidic, which can be dangerous as it can cause difficulty breathing, brain swelling, coma, or even death.

A ketone test detects ketones in a blood or urine sample.

Your goal

The overall goal of managing your sick days is to keep your blood glucose at a safe level and your ketones negative. This will be a challenge, however it will ensure you don't get sicker and go into ketoacidosis.

Check your blood glucose every few hours and your ketones each time you go to the toilet.

We all get sick. It's unfortunate, however being prepared and knowing what to do will help you recover quickly.



Contact your doctor if you have a large amount of ketones.

Avoid dehydration

Avoiding dehydration is more important than eating. You may lose your appetite when you are sick, but as long as you are getting enough of the right type of fluids that's okay. Drink plenty of unsweetened fluids.

If you aren't eating, you can use fluids to get your carbohydrate and energy requirements. This is one of the few times it is recommended you drink sweet drinks in place of your usual diet of artificially sweetened drinks.

Drink at least 100mls every one to two hours to avoid dehydration. If you can't cope with this, then little and often is the key. Sip small amounts as even a teaspoon of fluid every 5 minutes will help.

Suitable fluids include:

- Popsicles or frozen ice blocks
- 1 cup of sweet fizzy drink e.g. lemonade, ginger ale
- 1 cup of milk or fruit juice
- 1 cup of soup
- Pottle of yoghurt
- Sucking on frozen ice cubes.

If you haven't got any of the above items, then 2 - 3 teaspoons of sugar in a glass of water is okay.

Tea and coffee aren't recommended as sources of fluid. If your blood glucose levels are less than 8 mmol/L, then small quantities of ice-cream and sweetened jelly are allowed.

What to eat

Eat whatever you can manage.

- Aim for one portion of 15 grams of carbohydrate every hour
- Dry foods like toast or crackers are sometimes better tolerated
- If you can eat, drink non-sweetened drinks like diet lemonade.

Diabetes medication

When you are sick you still should take your diabetes medication, including insulin. If you are on insulin, your insulin requirements may change and you may need to adjust your dose.

Take your diabetes medication even if you are vomiting. There is one exception to this rule - stop taking metformin (metomin, Glucophage) if you have vomiting or diarrhoea.

Your blood glucose is likely to be higher due to the illness. Follow the sick day instructions from your diabetes team on how to best manage your own requirements.

Over the counter medications

Tell the pharmacy you have diabetes and ask if the product is okay for your needs. If not, the pharmacist will recommend a more suitable brand of product.

Many cough medicines contain sugar. Usually this is only a small amount and is unlikely to have a great impact on your diabetes control. However, if you are taking it frequently, check with your doctor or diabetes team.

Key Points

- Check your blood glucose every 2-4 hours
- Check for ketones every time you urinate
- Avoid dehydration
- Seek medical help if you are concerned about your health for any reason
- Let someone know you are unwell so they can check on you - this may be a neighbour or family member.

Of course, prevention of illness is better than cure, and the influenza injection is recommended. Discuss this with your doctor.

Remember that regular physical activity helps keep your body in top shape to fight off bugs.

Eating a healthy diet with plenty of vitamin C-containing fruits and vegetables is also a good winter defence.

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