

INSPIRATION

# FACING UP TO THE DIABETES CHALLENGE

**Diabetes can be challenging to live with, but for international athlete, Melanie Stephenson, it is the driving force behind her sporting achievements and her passion to campaign for improved diabetes awareness, care and support.**



**Melanie Stephenson**  
Living with Type 1 diabetes

Last year, Stephenson carried the Olympic Torch in front of 20,000 people in her home city of Cardiff. The 200m sprinter, who was representing young people with diabetes, believes the condition changed her life for the better.

“Having diabetes made me stronger and more determined to achieve the goals I set for myself,” explains Stephenson. “When I was 16, I wanted to take control of the condition and knew that exercise would help. So I started getting involved in athletics, even if the medical team following me at the time had concerns about my decision.” Alongside diet, regular exercise is very effective at improving diabetes control and reducing the risk of complications such as heart disease. However, it’s important to take precautions, like frequently monitoring blood glucose levels and planning ahead so that the amount of insulin and food intake is matched to the exercise.

**Acceptance is key**

Stephenson, 25, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes just after her 13th birthday. “I had the typical symptoms of the condition; I was tired, thirsty and needed to go to the toilet constantly,” she says.

“Having diabetes affected my daily routine, as all of a sudden everything had to be planned. My diet changed and exercising became a bit of a challenge. I found it difficult explaining to new friends that I had diabetes, and dealing with hypoglycemia (when blood glucose levels are low) in the presence



**ROLE MODEL**  
Melanie Stephenson is a great role model to young people with diabetes and uses her experience to help others. Last year she carried the Olympic Torch in her home city of Cardiff, representing young people with diabetes.  
PHOTOS: PRIVATE



of other people was hard. “But I did overcome all this, as I believe it’s important not to let diabetes take over your life. The best way to do so is to accept that you have the condition and to learn, day by day, what can help in your journey with it. You will be better equipped to address any problem that comes your way.”

**The importance of helping others**

Now Stephenson is an inspired, enthusiastic ambassador for

Diabetes UK. Among other things, she is part of the charity’s Young Leaders Action Group (YLAG), campaigning to raise awareness of the condition and improve the care and support given to young people with diabetes.

Stephenson also shares her experience of sport and exercise and diabetes on a dedicated blog. “It’s really important to help and interact with others who have the condition,” she says. “Because when people with diabetes come together they connect, even if

they have never met before. And talking about their experiences, whether good or bad, comes naturally, which benefits them hugely in terms of maintaining a positive attitude.”

Stephenson’s message to young people with the condition? “You can achieve your goals. Diabetes doesn’t need to stop you at all.”

LORENA TONARELLI  
info.uk@mediaplanet.com

DIABETES: THE FACTS

## Type 1 diabetes

used to be called juvenile-onset diabetes. It is usually caused by an auto-immune reaction where the body’s defense system attacks the cells that produce insulin

## Type 2 diabetes

used to be called non-insulin dependent diabetes or adult-onset diabetes, and accounts for at least 90 per cent of all cases of diabetes

Half of people who die from diabetes are under the age of 60

4 out of 5

people with diabetes live in low- and middle-income countries

1 in 2 people with diabetes don’t know they have it

Source: International Diabetes Federation

## INSPIRATION



**BE PROACTIVE**  
Maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle is key to managing blood glucose levels  
PHOTO: DIABETES UK/ SHUTTERSTOCK

# Managing and preventing Type 2 diabetes with diet and activity

**Question:** Why is a healthy diet and regular physical activity so important in managing Type 2 diabetes?

**Answer:** They are key to good blood glucose control, which in turn reduces the risk of serious complications. And they can help to prevent the condition in the first place.



**'Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness in the UK and can lead to kidney disease, heart attacks, strokes and amputations'**

**Natasha Marsland**  
Clinical advisor, Diabetes UK

## CHANGE

Good blood glucose control is essential for effective Type 2 diabetes management. Maintaining a healthy weight through a balanced diet and regular physical activity is key to managing blood glucose levels and consequently, lowering the risk of complications such as heart disease, eye problems and amputations.

## Get the right energy balance

Natasha Marsland, clinical advisor for the charity Diabetes UK, says: "Being overweight or obese is one of the main contributing factors to developing Type 2 diabetes. Other risk factors include having a large waist, high blood pressure, and having a close relative with diabetes. The risk increases with age and is higher for people from a black, Asian or ethnic minority background.

"A balanced, healthy diet and 30 minutes of moderate activity five days a week can help people with the condition who are overweight

burn more calories, facilitating weight loss and, in turn, blood glucose control."

## Key dietary recommendations

"A qualified dietitian can give advice on healthy eating according to patients' needs, but the basic principles are the same: eating more fruit and vegetables, reducing sugar and fat intake, cutting down on alcohol, and including low-glycemic index

foods like whole grains and basmati rice. "Salt intake should also be reduced, to lower the risk of high blood pressure and its complications, including heart disease. For the same reason, saturated fats such as butter should be replaced with mono-unsaturated ones like olive oil. In this regard, it is important to read labels when buying foods, as they can sometimes be misleading. For example, a product may be advertised as low fat but still contain too much

salt, sugar or the wrong type of fat. "In terms of portion sizes, at every main meal people with Type 2 diabetes, like the rest of us, should fill one half of their plate with vegetables; one third with starchy foods such as pasta, rice, bread or potatoes; and the remainder with protein-containing foods like chicken, fish, lean beef or legumes."

Meal times need not be dull however — sweeteners such as extract from the stevia leaf and other products can be useful to liven up meals whilst cutting down on sugar. Sweeteners being much sweeter than sugar but with no calories, stevia can be a useful way to help in keeping to a healthy weight.

## Prevention is paramount

A balanced, healthy diet and regular activity are also central to reducing the risk of Type 2 diabetes, says Marsland. "This is important, because there is no cure for the condition; once developed, it is there for life and it is serious. Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness in the UK and can lead to kidney disease, heart attacks, strokes and amputations. So, preventing the condition in the first place is crucial. We run Healthy Lifestyle roadshows across the UK, giving people the opportunity to be assessed for their risk of developing the condition, as well as information on how they can turn their life around by reducing such risk."

**LORENA TONARELLI**  
info.uk@mediaplanet.com

## DIET AND LIFESTYLE: FACTS

- **Around 80 per cent** of cases of Type 2 diabetes can be delayed or prevented with lifestyle changes, such as losing weight and increasing physical activity.
- **80 to 90 per cent** of people with the condition are overweight.
- **Weight loss is** the most effective intervention to prevent Type 2 diabetes. For every kilogram lost, the risk of getting the condition is reduced by 16 per cent.
- **People with Type 2 diabetes** who lose weight have better glucose control

and are less likely to develop long-term complications such as heart disease.

- **Increased physical activity** and cutting down on fats and calories are effective at both preventing Type 2 diabetes in people at risk and at managing blood glucose control in those with the condition.
- **You can keep your diet interesting** while cutting the calories through swapping sugar for sweeteners such as those from the stevia leaf.



## WIDER HEALTH ISSUES

**Diabetes can affect your health in ways which you wouldn't always expect. Benedict Jephcote, editor of Diabetes.co.uk explains how it can impact.**



## Your eyes

➔ Changes in blood glucose levels can affect the shape of the eye, causing blurring of vision. Members of the Diabetes.co.uk forum have reported having needed to increase the strength of their glasses a number of times over a period of months before getting their sugar levels under control, at which point they needed to return to their old lens strength!



## Your teeth

➔ Gum disease is around three times more likely for people with diabetes. When blood glucose levels rise, sugar levels in other fluids, such as the saliva and gingival fluid (a fluid that sits between the gums and teeth), also rise. This means that there is a direct link between better blood glucose control and healthier teeth and gums.



## Sleeping

➔ High blood sugar levels can lead to fatigue through the day but can also make sleep at night more difficult. Getting to sleep and staying asleep can be affected by higher sugar levels.