Navigating Life Choices with Diabetes

Smoking, Vaping, Chewing Tobacco

Smoking and vaping cause lung cancer and heart disease. They can also make asthma, allergies, and other health problems worse. These products are addictive, which means that your body and brain want more of it. The products contain chemicals that are known to cause cancer. Some contain metals like tin and lead that can damage the body.

Chewing tobacco causes your body to absorb **more nicotine than smoking.** It is linked to mouth, throat, and nose cancers. Some people think this is safer than smoking, but that is not true.

Impact on Diabetes

Smoking/vaping and chewing tobacco are very harmful for people with diabetes. They greatly increase the risk of heart and blood vessel diseases and other problems.

What can you do?

Quitting smoking, vaping, or chewing tobacco can protect your health. Talk to your doctor, a social worker, or visit smokefree.gov for help.

Marijuana (Cannabis)

Marijuana contains a chemical called THC. THC causes your body to feel different or "high." It has been linked to symptoms of mental illness in some people.

Impact on Diabetes

- Using marijuana may lead to memory or concentration issues. This makes it harder to remember or manage your diabetes care.
- Marijuana can cause overeating (also known as "munchies"- cravings for sweet/fatty food) and can lead to high blood sugars.
- Smoking or vaping marijuana can damage your heart and lungs.
- Marijuana use may cause repeated vomiting (hyperemesis syndrome), leading to dehydration or dangerous ketones (DKA) that require emergent care in a hospital.

What can you do?

- The best way to stay safe is not using marijuana.
- If you use marijuana, buy it from a trusted source and take insulin for any carbs you eat.
- Never drive during or after using marijuana.
- Always carry medical ID or have emergency info in your wallet or phone.

Alcohol

Alcohol slows your brain and body, making it harder to think, move, and feel emotions.

Impact on Diabetes

- Alcohol can raise blood sugar at first, especially with sugary drinks or mixers. Later, alcohol can cause low blood sugar – for up to 24 hours – because your liver is busy getting rid of the alcohol.
- Your body might not respond or won't respond as well to emergency glucagon after drinking.
- Low blood sugars can be confused with alcohol intoxication.

What can you do?

- Drinking alcohol is illegal if you are under 21 years old.
- If you drink, limit to 1-2 drinks and avoid sugary mixers.
- Always eat something when drinking. Don't drink on an empty stomach because you could have low blood sugar.
- Check your sugar levels before and after drinking and monitor more closely for up to 24 hours. Consider setting an alarm reminder or asking a friend to help you remember.
- Tell your friends about what low blood sugars look like and how to treat them. Ask a trusted friend or two to help you watch for low blood sugars.
- Consider lowering your insulin dose for corrections or reduce your basal rate or use an activity mode (on pump) after drinking to reduce the risk of low blood sugars.
- Never drive during or after drinking.
- Always carry medical ID or have emergency info in your wallet or phone.

Other Recreational Drugs

Drugs can mimic a low blood sugar. It may be harder to know when your blood sugar is dropping. Using drugs also makes it harder to take care of yourself and manage your diabetes.

What can you do?

Avoid drugs. They can be dangerous, even if you use them just once. Always carry medical ID or have emergency info in your wallet or phone.

Sex and Pregnancy

Unprotected sex can be risky. It can lead to unexpected pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). People with diabetes have the same chance of becoming pregnant as those without diabetes.

Impact on Diabetes

- Sex is a physical activity and can result in low blood sugars.
- High blood sugar levels can cause problems like birth defects, or can worsen diabetes complications (like retinopathy, or eye damage)
- If blood sugars are high, especially for long periods of time, sexual function health and arousal may be affected.

What can you do?

- The only way to fully prevent pregnancy is to not have sex.
- If you are sexually active, use birth control. Talk to your doctor about the best options for you.
- Always use condoms to prevent STIs.
- Keep your blood sugars in a healthy range to avoid complications.
- Plan pregnancies carefully. Most experts recommend an A1C of 6.5% or less (without too many low blood sugars) to reduce risk of serious birth defects and complications.
- If you are pregnant or think you might be, contact your diabetes provider right away. You will need frequent, specialized care to stay safe.
- If you are sexually active, get tested for STIs. This testing can be kept private. Find free or low-cost testing clinics on the CDC or Planned Parenthood websites. Planned parenthood also has a free online chat where you can ask questions privately.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 2/2025 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8400