

Dear maggie

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Dear Maggie,

I've suffered with depression for many years and now I have developed diabetes. I thought you had to have a family history of diabetes to get it. As far as I know, no one in my family has ever been diagnosed with diabetes. Could you tell me why I have got it?

Hi Chris

That's a good question and no-one is quite sure of the answer! A family history of type 2 diabetes is the biggest risk factor for developing diabetes, but it is becoming clearer that depression can be involved in the development of this disease too.

Studies have shown that having diabetes can lead to depression and that having depression can lead to diabetes (how's that for getting a visit from the Bad-Luck Fairy?). To make a joke out of a serious problem I always say that if you didn't have depression before, having diabetes will make you depressed. In many ways it isn't hard to see why this could be true. Why depression can sometimes lead to diabetes is a bit harder to understand.

It is often a shock to be told you have diabetes. It means a complete re-think about your life and can be demanding and very frightening. To start with it probably means you will have to change your diet and exercise routine. If you have had a life relatively free of health professionals, that's about to change. From now on you will be seeing your GP, diabetes educator, optometrist, and podiatrist regularly. You will probably start finger pricking and testing your blood glucose levels. If you have type 1 diabetes you will be giving yourself several injections of insulin every day, which leaves you at risk of having hypos (hypoglycaemic episodes – not nice at all!)

All these are the routine things of having diabetes but there is also the emotional side. The shock of diagnosis can be especially bad for people who had a relative with diabetes who had the long term damage that diabetes may cause. People are often very frightened of developing diabetes because they really don't want to suffer in the same way. It would take

a very resilient person not to be depressed under those circumstances.

Finally, some unfortunate people do have long term damage to their feet, eyes, kidneys and heart. Being constantly unwell, in pain or discomfort or being unable to see properly is certainly enough to make anyone depressed.

Fair enough, but why does depression cause diabetes? Strangely no one is quite sure. The most common idea is that depression often slows you down. You may sleep more, move less, eat more and this can lead to hormonal changes and weight gain which may result in diabetes. Some researchers think that if you have the type of depression where you are more agitated and less able to sleep that you are more likely to suffer from the added stress, leading to weight gain and diabetes. Others wonder if the tablets used to treat depression causes the diabetes by causing weight gain. Some men resist going to their doctor and try to feel better by drinking more alcohol, which can cause weight gain. Who really knows? All I can definitively say is that depression causes something to go on in the body which renders it vulnerable to diabetes.

Chris, no-one can presently tell you exactly why you have depression and have now developed diabetes. The important thing now is to make sure that none of these nasty conditions ever make a mess of your life. Apart from both starting with the letter 'D' (could that be the cause!) both have the potential to make your life miserable and even end it, but both can be lived with and lived with well.

Firstly, keep in touch with your GP, and your endocrinologist and psychiatrist if you see them, to make sure you have the best, most effective medical treatment for both conditions. Then,



guess what? Exercise! Diabetes alone, when out of control can make people exhausted just getting out of bed. Untreated depression can have the same effect, so take your tablets for the depression and diabetes. If you are on insulin, do your injections. Eat the appropriate foods to help control your diabetes, reduce your alcohol intake if you are drinking (not good with the tablets for depression anyway) and get moving. Even if it's the last thing you want to do, don't think about it, just do it.

I cannot stress enough how important exercise is in the treatment of depression. Exercise has as strong an effect on lifting depression as tablets. Exercise has the added benefit of making you fit as well as feeling happier and more optimistic, and this is very important. You may lose weight, which will be an added benefit, but even if you don't it's not so important if you are fit. A mixture of exercises that get your heart beating a bit faster, such as walking, swimming and playing golf, combined with exercise that improves your muscle strength and flexibility, like Pilates or weight training are the best. Even just walking the dog a couple of times a day or putting in a veggie garden will work, as long as it's regular.

So Chris, I haven't been able to answer your question, but I hope I have been able to help you live a long, healthy and happy life with diabetes and depression.