

Your diabetes management support team: who's who?

When first diagnosed with type 1 diabetes you may feel overwhelmed with questions and concerns about how it will impact your day-to-day life and future health. Being told that you have a chronic condition is a lot to take in, however it is important to remember that you are not alone. There are a range of health professionals who are there to help you understand what it means to live well with type 1 diabetes and empower you to manage your condition. You will be at the centre of this diabetes management team along with your family and those close to you. You will still see your regular GP and they will refer you to specialist health professionals, such as an endocrinologist and diabetes educator, who will provide you with the support and knowledge you need to manage your diabetes. This will be reinforced by other professionals such as a dietitian, psychologist or counsellor, podiatrist, dentist and perhaps an exercise physiologist, as well as peer support groups and online resources you that you can utilise.

THE TEAM

You

As the person living with diabetes you are the most important member of your management team. You understand the challenges associated with your condition and handle the majority of management tasks such as blood glucose monitoring, administering insulin and coordinating your health appointments. There will be times when you may need more support, help getting back on track or simply reassurance about how you are doing. You will also need to regularly review your management plan with your team. Diabetes Australia – Vic has a handy [type 1 checklist](#) to help you keep on top of your appointments and healthcare checks.

Diabetes-centred support

Endocrinologist

One of the first things your doctor will do is refer you to an endocrinologist – a medical specialist who is trained to diagnose and treat disorders of the endocrine system (the glands in the body that produce hormones).

Endocrinologists can provide expert advice on the management of diabetes, help you to control your blood glucose levels and work with you to prevent health complications. Your endocrinologist is a vital part of your team and will be able to investigate and interpret test results and provide care tailored to your specific needs. With a specialised interest in diabetes, they have a more complete understanding of the most up-to-date technologies, treatments and tests available.

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Diabetes educator

A diabetes educator is a health professional who has additional training and extensive experience in supporting people with diabetes. Some of the ways in which a diabetes educator can support you are:

- providing the tools and information needed to manage your diabetes on a daily basis, including keeping you up to date with the latest treatments and management developments
- reviewing your blood glucose levels (BGL)
- adjusting insulin
- providing insulin pump education
- assessing injection sites
- hypo management.

Some diabetes educators may have experience in teaching DAFNE (Dose Adjustment for Normal Eating) principles, for example, dosing insulin according to carbohydrate intake.

GP

Your general practitioner (GP) will be involved in assessing your diabetes and helping you to manage it. They provide medical services such as writing prescriptions, organising blood tests and writing referrals to specialists. You will continue to see your GP for any other health issues, whether related to diabetes or not.

How much time you spend with your GP depends on when you were diagnosed, the results of your blood glucose level checks and recent HbA1c, and your individual needs. When you are first diagnosed you may want to consider whether the GP you are seeing is right for you. Some questions you may want to consider include:

- Do you feel comfortable with your GP?
- Are you satisfied with their approach to your healthcare?
- Do they have experience with, and an interest in, the management of type 1 diabetes?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, it may be useful to search for an alternative. You are entitled to a GP that you feel understands and supports your diabetes management. Word-of-mouth can be a great way to find a good GP, so ask around to get a lead on a GP who is right for you.

Dietitian

It's a good idea to see a dietitian just after being diagnosed in order to gain an understanding of how food choices impact blood glucose levels. A dietitian can provide advice on nutrition and meal planning and will help you work out an eating plan suitable for your individual lifestyle (including any other dietary requirements you may have) and approach to diabetes management. A dietitian can also assist you with the practicalities of reading food labels and eating out.

Psychologist/counsellor/social worker

Seeing a psychologist or counsellor, particularly when first diagnosed, can be helpful. These sessions can provide you with a valuable source of support and an outlet to discuss your feelings around living with diabetes, rather than just concentrating on managing your condition.

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Allied support

Podiatrist

A podiatrist will help you to care for your feet by checking their general condition and structure. They will look for changes such as loss of sensation, infection or a decrease in blood supply. They will also provide support should any complications arise and can help you learn how to assess your own feet between visits. Generally, you only need to see a podiatrist once a year, unless you have any specific issues such as numbness or calluses.

Optometrist/ophthalmologist

An optometrist will test and assess the health of your eyes. If they suspect any changes or have concerns they will refer you to an ophthalmologist (a physician specialising in eye care). Having your eyes checked every year ensures that any changes in the condition of your eyes can be addressed as early as possible.

Dentist

Plan to visit your dentist every six months, this way any oral health issues arising from your diabetes (due to increased sugar levels in the saliva) can be prevented or minimised.

Pharmacist

Your pharmacist can provide general advice about your medications such as doses and potential side effects, as well as information on possible interactions between different medications. You can get the most accurate advice by getting all of your scripts filled by the same pharmacist. This allows them to analyse your needs based on your individual circumstances and medical history.

Exercise physiologist

While you can discuss exercise options with your GP, an exercise physiologist can provide an extra layer of expertise. Exercise physiologists are allied health professionals who specialise in the design and delivery of exercise programs as a treatment and prevention strategy for injuries and chronic diseases.

Working with an exercise physiologist may be useful as exercise can improve your blood glucose levels, reduce stress and improve your overall fitness level. Certain types of exercise can be particularly beneficial in reducing the risk of developing diabetes-related complications in the future.

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Effective relationships

Peer support

Many people find it helpful to share their experiences with other people who have diabetes. Both type 1 and type 2 diabetes support groups aim to share lived experiences of diabetes, reduce social isolation and share practical advice which you can then discuss with your health professionals. Type 1 and type 2 diabetes support groups are located across the state and provide an opportunity to build friendships and gain access to professional health and wellbeing information.

Getting the most out of your health care providers

Building trust with your healthcare team is a two-way process. Even the most attentive doctor won't know what goes on between visits unless you keep track and communicate any concerns or questions.

You can get the most out of each appointment by taking the following steps:

- Keep a running list of any issues you experience between visits.
- Maintain a diary and write down questions as they occur to you – take these to your next appointment.
- Consider which medical practitioners you might wish to see (for example an ophthalmologist) and talk to your GP about a referral.

Useful resources

- **Diabetes Australia – Vic** is an important first point of call for anyone seeking information about living well with diabetes, this is also where you can find out about support groups.
- **NDSS** – The NDSS delivers diabetes-related products at subsidised prices and provides information and support services to people with diabetes. Registration is free and open to all Australians diagnosed with diabetes.
- **Reality check** – Support, information and a voice for the type 1 community.
- **R U OK? Foundation** website includes tips on starting a conversation about psychological wellbeing and links to crisis support and expert advice.
- **SANE Australia** – aims to promote a better life for all Australians affected by mental illness through support, training and education.
- **Beyond Blue** – Provides information resources around anxiety and depression..
- **Lifeline** – provides all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to online, phone and face-to-face crisis support and suicide prevention services
- **Diabetes Counselling Online** – is a health service provider using web-based technology. Regular comment is sought on issues such as diabetes and pregnancy, diabetes statistics and impact, diabetes and depression, young people.