


Overcoming my needle phobia and ‘owning’ Type 2 diabetes



Confidence
to manage my
diabetes

Jackie Boyd from Richhill in Northern Ireland was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in 2004 when he was 50, after his sister, who also has Type 2 diabetes, persuaded him to do an at-home test.

His severe phobia of needles has made living with the condition particularly challenging, but new technology and the right support helped him to overcome this fear.

JOURNEY TO DIAGNOSIS

What started off as a bit of banter turned into a big surprise, when Jackie's results suggested that he had high blood glucose levels. Jackie said: "My sister was aware of my needle phobia and dared me to do the test. So, she persuaded me to do it, but when I did, my results were high. I did the test again the following day but at a different time, and my levels were still high – so she told me to go see my doctor.

"Initially, I was shocked. My sister has Type 2 diabetes and my grandmother had Type 1 diabetes – and while this gave me a level of awareness of the condition, I hadn't really given it that much thought until that moment and certainly did not think I was at risk."

IMPACT ON FAMILY AND SUPPORT

Jackie's diagnosis was also a big change for his family, who were concerned about how their lives might be impacted. He said: "My family worried about my diabetes and whether it would drastically change how we as a family lived our lives. But as time went on and we learned more about the condition and how it could be managed, we were able to put a lot of the concerns to one side."

A dedicated healthcare team provided Jackie with resources to help him manage his condition. He said: "Soon after being diagnosed, I was given the standard advice – watch what you eat, moderate exercise and take your prescribed medication. A dietitian talked me through the importance of having a good diet, what foods were beneficial and foods to avoid or eat in moderation. I also attended a two-day DESMOND course¹, which was very informative.

"In the past, I'd overheard people saying that diabetes is 'the fat disease' or it's because of 'unhealthy living', but through these resources I learned that this is not the cause."

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It's a shame that there is stigma attached to diabetes, as I know many people who don't want others to know that they are living with the condition.

PHOBIA OF NEEDLES

Jackie's phobia of needles created an additional barrier, which meant that managing his diabetes was particularly challenging.

He said: "I had and still have a very severe needle phobia, so managing my condition was not something I found very easy. I tried to finger prick to check my glucose levels two to four times a day, but often it would take me up to ten minutes or so to do the test, and my phobia meant that sometimes I did not test for days. It's fair to say that because of my phobia, I always had a variable amount of discomfort and pain with every test.

"For the first few years, I was able to manage my condition this way, but once I started twice-daily insulin injections in 2012, it started to have an even bigger impact on my life. My doctor was aware of my needle phobia and it took a year for me to be persuaded to try CBT, which enabled me to use an insulin pen but didn't cure my phobia in relation to injections and blood tests. It's something that still causes me problems to this day."

As many as one in ten adults report having a fear of needles², making the management of conditions such as diabetes, which can involve taking regular drops of blood to check glucose levels and daily insulin injections, especially difficult for people like Jackie.

Jackie said: "In late 2013, I stopped taking insulin completely due to my needle phobia and the constant need to finger prick. I missed injections for six weeks and became very ill. As part of the treatment, I was referred for CBT again. Also, my insulin pen needle was reduced from 5mm to 4mm, which helped with the pain I was experiencing due to tensing my muscles when I was injecting."

TRANSITION TO USING A CGM

Jackie's diabetes management continued to be chaotic and irregular for nearly a decade, but in 2023 everything changed when Jackie started using a continuous glucose monitor (CGM). He said: "I was already aware of CGM devices through Diabetes UK in Northern Ireland, where I have volunteered for the past ten years, and I had spoken to someone at the organisation who was convinced that using a CGM would help me with my finger prick problem.

"I spoke to a pharmacist who gave me a FreeStyle Libre 2 device to trial. After a month of positive results, I decided to continue using the device by self-funding it. A few months later, I asked my diabetes specialist nurse if I could have it on prescription, but I was told no. My nurse wasn't aware of the Pathway Document and NICE Guidelines which had been updated in Northern Ireland that recommended access to glucose sensors³ for some people with Type 2 on multiple daily injections and listed the criteria in line with NICE Guidelines for management of Type 2 diabetes in adults⁴."

Through his own research, Jackie knew that the guidelines had changed. He said: "I immediately submitted a report to my diabetes team and my GP requesting access to CGM based on the recommendations. I shared my trial results, which helped to convince them to prescribe, and within a short time, following some training on the use of the device, I received my first FreeStyle Libre 2 sensor on prescription in November 2023."

"I am more relaxed since there's no need to finger prick⁵. I can see instant results when I want on my phone⁶⁻⁸, and it has also taught me a lot about portion control and the effect of different foods on my glucose levels."



PROGRESS IN DIABETES MANAGEMENT

Since then, Jackie has made huge progress in managing his condition.

“It has given me a greater understanding of my condition and the need to take my injections at the correct time, to keep my diabetes properly under control. I have not missed any of my four daily injections since I started using Abbott’s FreeStyle Libre 2 sensor because of the confidence it has given me to manage my diabetes. I have even managed to lose weight.”

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A CGM device will help people living with Type 2 diabetes to take better care of themselves while also making the healthcare team’s life easier.

Jackie finds the device features, such as the alarms⁹ and readings, helpful for managing his diabetes. He said: “The alarms allow me to make quicker changes to prevent either a hypo or hyper, which gives me greater confidence when driving¹⁰. My insulin units can also be downloaded from my smart insulin pens¹¹ and my food intake recorded through the ‘Add Note’ feature of the FreeStyle LibreLink app⁷. My data can also be presented in graphs and patterns that make it easier to understand.”

AND FINALLY...

Jackie thinks more healthcare professionals should consider prescribing a CGM device to help people manage Type 2 diabetes. He said: “With the FreeStyle Libre 2 system, my data can be downloaded from my device even when I’m at home, so I don’t have to travel to a hospital or health centre.

“The reporting feature also provides my healthcare team with a picture of my glucose readings to help make sense of the daily trends over a period up to 90 days.”

He is also encouraging other people living with Type 2 diabetes to look into whether a CGM could work for them. He said: “I say grab it with both hands. It will give you a real insight into your diabetes and teach you how to look after yourself properly. It will completely transform your diabetes care, and it’s so easy to use. Since using my own device, I can confidently say that while I have diabetes, it does not control me.”

Disclaimer: The information provided is not intended to be used for medical diagnosis or treatment. Please consult your healthcare professional about your diabetes management. Individual symptoms, situations and circumstances may vary.

1. DESMOND is the collaborative name for a family of group self-management education modules, toolkits and care pathways for people with, or at risk of, type 2 diabetes. More information at: <https://www.desmond.nhs.uk/>. 2. British Heart Foundation (2021). Needle phobia: how to get over your fear of needles. Available at <https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/medical/needle-phobia>. Accessed November 2024. 3. Diabetes Network Northern Ireland (2024). Regional N. Ireland Pathway for the Managed Access of Glucose Sensors. 4. NICE (2015; Last updated 2022). Type 2 diabetes in adults: management. Available at <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng28>. Accessed November 2024. 5. Finger pricks are required if glucose readings and alarms do not match symptoms or expectations. 6. Glucose readings are automatically displayed in the FreeStyle LibreLink app only when the smartphone and the FreeStyle Libre 2 sensor are connected and in range. 7. The FreeStyle LibreLink app is only compatible with certain mobile devices and operating systems. Please check the website for more information about device compatibility before using the app. Use of FreeStyle LibreLink may require registration with LibreView. 8. 60-minute warm-up required when applying the sensor. 9. Notifications will only be received when alarms are turned on and the sensor is within 6 meters (20 ft) unobstructed of the reading device. 10. The DVLA (Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency) has permitted the use of Flash Glucose Monitoring systems for the purpose of driving with Group 1 drivers. Drivers using the FreeStyle Libre 2 system must get a confirmatory finger prick glucose level in the following circumstances: if their glucose level is 4.0mmol/L or below; if they have symptoms of hypoglycaemia; if their readings are not consistent with their symptoms; if they have become hypoglycaemic or have indication of impending hypoglycaemia. Flash Glucose Monitoring systems are not legally permitted for the purposes of Group 2 drivers. More information at Diabetes and Driving - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk). 11. The FreeStyle LibreLink app is only compatible with NovoPen® 6 and NovoPen Echo® Plus.

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