

Yes, I Can Eat That

Answering Diabetes Questions

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😊 Children with Diabetes*



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When someone learns you have diabetes, one of the first things they'll do is ask a question based on a common misconception, or myth. This should have been listed on the job description when we took diabetes as our second full time job, but of course, it was not. And, by the way, none of us chose this job and would give it away if we could.

Here are some of the most common questions I have gotten about diabetes and some tips and tricks for dealing with them as people with diabetes (PWD) and loved ones of PWD. I also try to remember that usually these questions are coming from a loving and caring place, so try to remember that the people asking them are on your side!

#1: When you have diabetes, you can't eat sugar/carbs/food that tastes good/dessert/etc.

One of my all-time favorite diabetes memes lists Things a Person with Diabetes Cannot Eat as 1. Poison and 2. Cookies with Poison. I have been asked, "Can you eat that?" more times than I can even count, and this is why it is number one on my list. Large family holidays are stressful enough without someone asking you about your food choices while you are trying to calculate the amount of carbs you are putting on your plate, deciding if you pre-bolused enough or need to take a break from the buffet line, and your children are pulling on your leg asking for more macaroni and cheese.

The good news here is that with all of the insulin options we have as PWD, there are many ways to make your diet fit into diabetes as opposed to trying to force a diet on yourself that is unrealistic or not enjoyable. It may take a little trial and error and you may need to add some more insulin for the fat and protein, but if you're willing to put in the work, you'll be happy with your results.

Response Ideas:

- Let's find out? (Only joking, but wouldn't it be SO fun to say this!)
- Yes, as long as I take insulin for the food I'm eating, I can eat anything within reason.
- Yes, remember I have this really cool device called an insulin pump? It helps me with my blood sugars.
- Yes, I can thank you.
- Pretend you didn't hear it and walk away...it's ok to do this sometimes! We don't have to be #1 Person with Diabetes ALL the time.
- BONUS points – Your significant other comes in and handles the question for you, "Yes grandma, she can eat anything because she's a diabetes superstar!"

#2: Are you “in control”?

Oof, what a question, right? There are many variations to this question, and it's similar to the question in #3. The hard part about this one is that most of us PWD are already judging ourselves for our struggles with diabetes management. This is the reason I changed my high alert on my Dexcom on my phone to be a “happier” sounding song, so that I would get less upset when it alerts. Because diabetes has WAY too many variables and doesn't play by the rules, when someone asks this question, it can feel really defeating.

Sometimes your healthcare team may put in your health record that you have “uncontrolled diabetes.” This may not be in a judgmental way; it may be to try and help get diabetes technologies or medications approved for you by your insurance. This question was harder for me when I was a younger adult when I thought that I could have “perfect” diabetes since I am a nurse and have had diabetes forever, so obviously I can do it, right? WRONG! No one gets it perfect all the time!!

Response Ideas:

- Yes, I am the perfect person with diabetes, and I am in fabulous control (congratulations you just jinxed yourself and your CGM is about to alarm in front of this person...)
- I do consider myself relatively healthy, it's a lot of hard work, but I try!
- “Control” is not my favorite word to describe diabetes. Did you know that there are at least 42 things that affect blood glucose? Don't take your fully functional pancreas for granted!
- Are you in control of everything in your life? (Again, only joking, but it's fun to dream about snarky responses)

#3: Do you have the bad kind of diabetes?

What's the good kind and how do I sign up? There is not a “bad” type of diabetes, it's all less pleasant than a fully functional body, but it's the card we were dealt. Also, sometimes diabetes can be an okay thing. We have a neighbor who was diagnosed in his 50's and he said that he honestly feels he is healthier now that he has diabetes because before he didn't think much about his health at all. Not that you have to love it every day, because no one does, but looking at the positives can be helpful to stay resilient for the long haul.

I know that some of us, depending on where we are emotionally, sometimes feel jealous of other people with diabetes of a different type because we may think that their diabetes is “easier,” but the reality is, they are all difficult in their own way. I know I used to feel this way when I was younger on my harder days with diabetes, that I wished I could lose weight and not have to take insulin and thought it would be easy to do that. Then I became an adult and realized losing weight is SO hard! The grass is always greener, as the saying goes.

Response Ideas:

- All types of diabetes have their pros and cons
- What do you mean by “bad” kind?
- Well, I have type 1 diabetes, which means I take insulin all the time, but I wouldn't consider it worse than type 2. Each are difficult in different ways.
- There is no “good” diabetes

#4: Oh, my grandma/uncle/cousin's uncle/<insert obscure relative> has diabetes, too. They lost their leg.

The good news here is that diabetes complication rates have been on the decline over the past 20+ years.

I honestly am shocked at the number of ADULTS who said this to me when I was a child. I do feel like it is getting less common to talk about some of the really devastating complications that can happen, which gives me hope that people are catching diabetes earlier and preventing them. Nonetheless, usually they're talking about type 2 diabetes, because it is so much more common, and again, this doesn't mean it's better or worse, but it is very different than type 1. There have also been so many advances for diabetes management throughout the last ten years, which unfortunately usually the older relatives did not have access to.

Also, sometimes diabetes complications happen, even when people work hard at staying in range. We still don't really understand all the nuances of diabetes and complications; all we know is that if we try to meet the recommended targets,

it can help prevent them. Most people in the United States do not meet the recommended targets even with all the fancy tools we have available.¹ This is not something that we should feel shameful about, nor shame others for their experiences.

Response Ideas:

- I'm sorry to hear that; it sounds awful!
- Well, I'm hoping to avoid complications as best as I can.
- Sometimes diabetes complications happen, and it can be harder to catch type 2 diabetes early on.
- I feel lucky because I have this cool new diabetes device (then tell them about your CGM/pump/etc.)
- #5: What's that thing on your arm? (Could be any body part – but usually the arm is where I get most questions)

I was asked by a toddler yesterday why I had a Band-Aid on my arm, and I explained it was my continuous glucose monitor for diabetes. I, personally, really enjoy educating children, who are usually approaching you in a very curious, non-judgmental way. Again, like all these questions, it is completely up to you and how you are feeling if you want to engage, educate, or ignore. It's your diabetes, and your decision.

Here are a few of the more interesting ways people have asked me about my CGM:

Did you know there's something on your arm? (I think he thought someone was tracking me without my knowledge?)
What's that cool thing you all are wearing? Is it a new fitness tracker? (To a group of us T1Ds at a bar)
Is that a nicotine patch?

Response Ideas:

- This is my continuous glucose monitor/insulin pump – I have diabetes, and this helps me stay healthy.
- It's for my diabetes.
- It's how the government keeps track of me.
- I have no idea – where did that come from?! Did you put it there?

Alright, those last two were just for fun. In all seriousness, I usually do take the time to educate people about diabetes. But it can feel exhausting when you're doing it all the time, so find someone you vent to and laugh with about all these interactions. Hopefully, the more we teach others, the more mindful and educated they will be going forward.

Have a story to share about your own diabetes questions or answers? Check out @CWDiabetes on Facebook...

References:

1. **State of Type 1 Diabetes Management and Outcomes from the T1D Exchange in 2016–2018**
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7061293/>

For more information, visit cwd.is/news.