

# Starting Uni



**with Diabetes**

**Starting University is a  
life-changing event  
and diabetes doesn't  
need to get in the way**

**By students, for students**

**Starting University is an exciting time in life. For people with diabetes it may be a challenge immersing yourself in the University experience while managing your diabetes away from home, possibly for the first time.**

**It can be tricky keeping your blood sugars controlled at the best of times. The immediate danger is avoiding a hypo which can cause serious problems such as black outs. On the other hand, the long-term cumulative risks of high blood sugars can include heart, eye and kidney disease.**

**This leaflet gives you a few tips on managing your diabetes in a University environment. It is designed for people with type one diabetes (or insulin-dependent diabetes).**

**The aim of this leaflet is to help you fit your diabetes around your life and what you want to do at University, rather than letting your diabetes control you.**



# ALCOHOL

**Alcohol increases your blood sugar immediately after drinking but makes your sugars crash in the night or the next morning, resulting in a hypo.**

**It is, however, virtually impossible to avoid the lure of alcohol at University. Here are a few tips for drinking with diabetes.**

**Eat a meal containing long-acting carb before drinking. Never drink on an empty stomach.**

**Have a snack when you get home. Long-acting carb, such as toast, is ideal.**

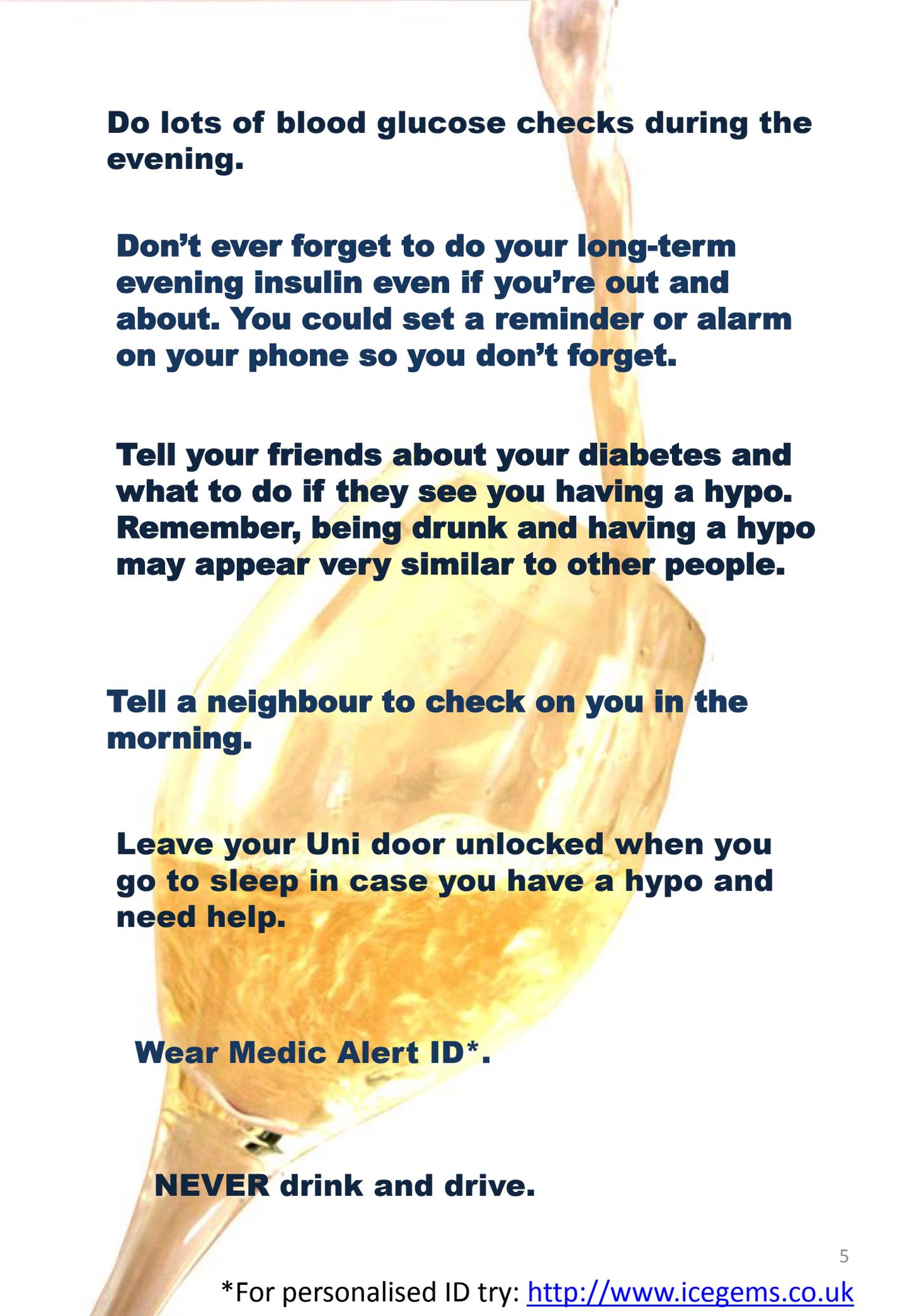
**Have short- and long-term carb by your bed in case of a hypo in the night.**

**The risk of a hypo continues well into the next morning, so don't miss breakfast the next day and keep snacks at hand.**

**Your blood glucose should be no less than 10mmol/l when you go to bed.**

**“Alcohol is awful, it messes me up completely, I don't drink if I don't have to”**

**Lucy, 21, has lived with Type 1 Diabetes for 10 years.**

A close-up photograph of a golden beer being poured into a glass. The liquid is captured mid-pour, creating a dynamic, flowing shape. The background is plain white, making the golden color of the beer stand out.

**Do lots of blood glucose checks during the evening.**

**Don't ever forget to do your long-term evening insulin even if you're out and about. You could set a reminder or alarm on your phone so you don't forget.**

**Tell your friends about your diabetes and what to do if they see you having a hypo. Remember, being drunk and having a hypo may appear very similar to other people.**

**Tell a neighbour to check on you in the morning.**

**Leave your Uni door unlocked when you go to sleep in case you have a hypo and need help.**

**Wear Medic Alert ID\*.**

**NEVER drink and drive.**

# Which Drink?

**Avoid alcopops like Smirnoff Ice, they'll send your sugar levels soaring.**

**This can result in ketoacidosis, which is highly dangerous.**

**Always go for diet coke or slimline tonic as a mixer. However be aware that busy bartenders may give you regular coke instead. Be prepared to explain why you need diet coke.**

**Instead of shots have a diet mixer and spirit. Shots make you drunk too quickly and this could result in a worse hypo later on.**



# **How do I tell people about my diabetes?**

**Many diabetics find it a hassle or even embarrassing telling people about their condition. Particularly at Uni, when meeting lots of new people, it can be hard to know who to tell and how to tell them. But don't shy away from talking about it. It's important not to go it alone as others may be able to help you out, for example by watching for hypos. You will probably feel much more comfortable doing injections and blood checks if you know that your friends understand diabetes: you should remember that it really isn't a big deal. Your health is much more important than letting embarrassment get in the way.**

**Being confident when talking about your diabetes is probably the best approach. Nobody will think badly of you because you have diabetes. It's just that they most likely won't understand what diabetes is and how it affects your life.**

**University is an opportunity to choose a group of friends which you feel comfortable with. Try and surround yourself with people who appreciate and are helpful with your diabetes.**



## **Here are some tips from different students:**

**“I don’t go around telling everyone “I’m diabetic” straight out. What I did was let people see me doing checks and then waited for them to ask or look as if they were wondering what I was doing and then I’d explain. Everyone was curious about it and most people were interested.”**

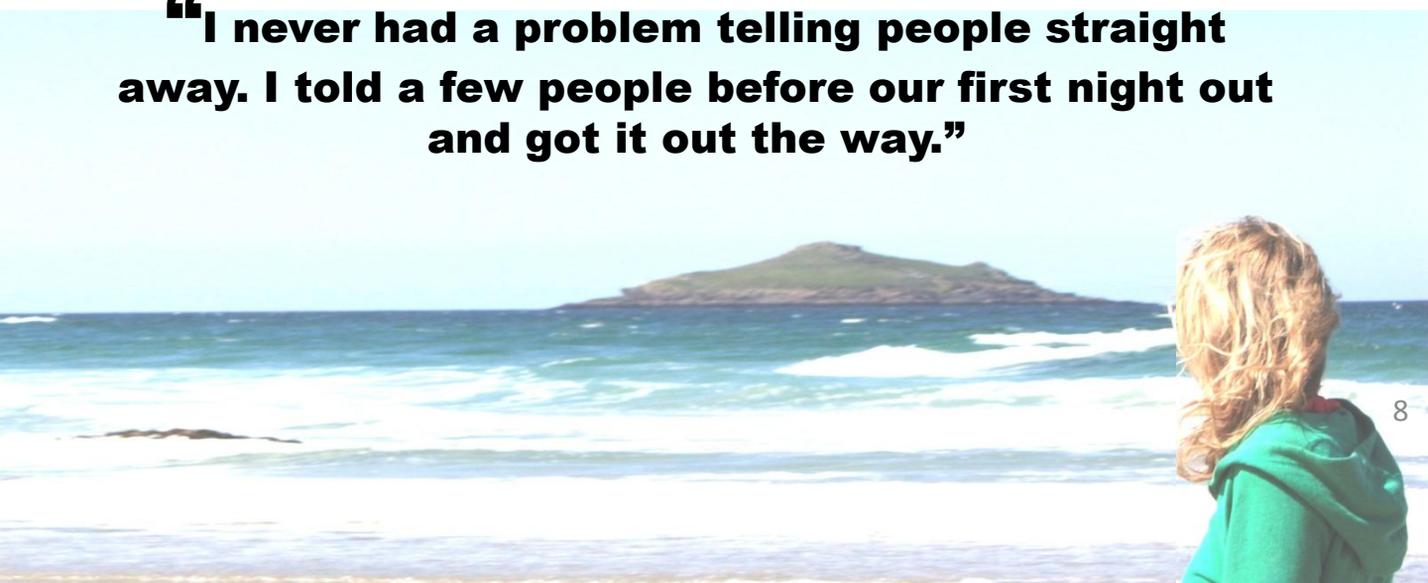
**“I’ve never had any problems telling anyone about my diabetes at Uni, everyone has been great and it’s been easier than school.”**

**“I steered away from some groups in my halls which I knew were into drugs. I didn’t want to be pushed into doing them – at Uni you can really choose who you’re friends with.”**

**“I didn’t want to be annoying by telling everyone about my diabetes but I let the people I spent most time with know. That way I felt supported by my closest friends.”**

**“It was important to let my best friends know about my diabetes – when I was really ill in first year they helped me out loads.”**

**“I never had a problem telling people straight away. I told a few people before our first night out and got it out the way.”**



# SPORTS

**University offers a whole range of sports teams and societies to get involved in.**

**Exercise is good for your health and particularly important for people with diabetes. Regular exercise helps maintain a healthy weight and can prevent heart disease.**

**Be aware that exercise can induce hypoglycaemia so do blood glucose checks before and after exercising. Eat more carb if your blood glucose is less than 7 mmol/l before exercising.**

**Have short- and long-acting carb at hand while exercising. Don't be pushed to start exercising before your blood sugars have risen.**

**New and unusual sports will be on offer at University. There are restrictions on SCUBA diving for people with diabetes. Ask your diabetes team or the sports captain if you are unsure. And remember to inform the captain or organiser that you are diabetic.**



# STRESS

University, while being new and exciting, is also life-changing and sometimes stressful – looking after your diabetes well will give you one less thing to worry about.

**Stressful situations usually increase your blood glucose.**

**Monitor your blood glucose closely, you may need to increase your insulin dose.**

**Although it may seem a chore, taking the time to do a few extra checks will save you more hassle later on.**

**Hopefully, keeping your diabetes on the right track will help you to feel calmer about other aspects of life.**

# DRUGS

**Drugs affect your brain and impair your management of diabetes. Drugs are never a good idea for diabetics. Here are the facts:**

**Amphetamine** and **ecstasy** make you dehydrated and suppress your appetite so can cause severe hypoglycaemia in people with diabetes. The effects of ecstasy make you less sensitive to hypo signals.

**Benzodiazepines (e.g. valium)** affect your judgement, meaning that you might forget to take your insulin or not recognise a hypo.

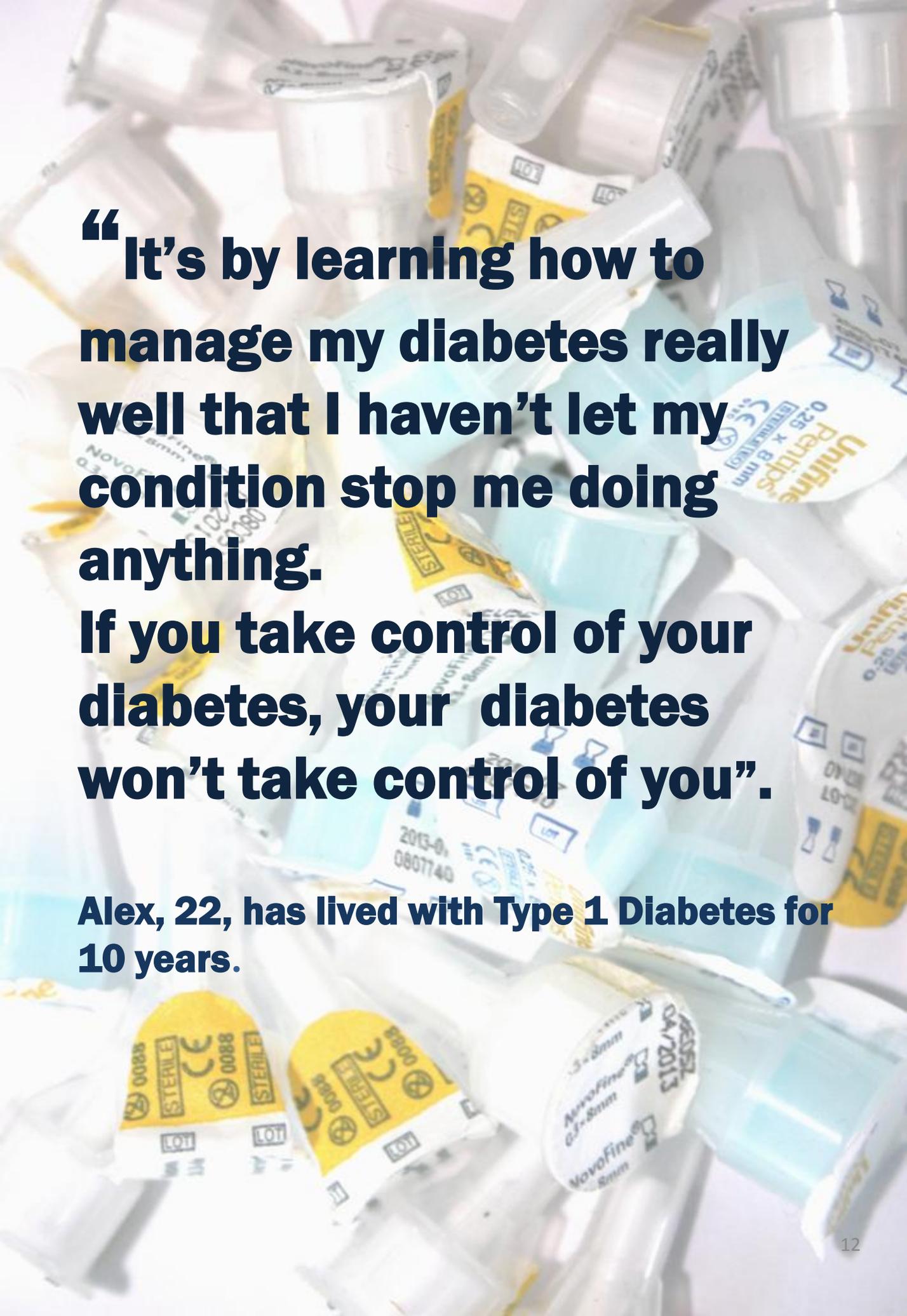
**Cannabis** affects your decision making and gives you the “munchies” which will increase your blood glucose level.

**Ketamine** causes hallucinations, out of body experiences and can stop you physically moving, which makes proper diabetes management impossible.

**Cocaine** is responsible for heart attacks in young people and is highly addictive. Regular users are likely to experience mood changes or depression.

**“I would never touch drugs, it’s too much of a risk with diabetes, it would never be worth it”**

**Luke, 22, has had type 1 diabetes for 4 years.**



**“It’s by learning how to manage my diabetes really well that I haven’t let my condition stop me doing anything. If you take control of your diabetes, your diabetes won’t take control of you”.**

**Alex, 22, has lived with Type 1 Diabetes for 10 years.**



# Healthy Eating

**A balanced diet will benefit all aspects of your life, and looking after your health is particularly important for people with diabetes.**

**A healthy diet may not be your priority when rushing around and meeting new people at the start of Uni. But although a challenge, maintaining a balanced diet and regular eating will help your blood sugars, stress levels, keep your immune system healthy and prevent long-term complications of diabetes.**

**Try and eat as regularly as possible.**



**Have carb, protein and fruit or veg at every meal. Aim for five portions of fruit and veg a day.**

**Don't have too much butter, cheese, cream and red meat as these are high in saturated fat.**

**Instead of fatty red meats, go for lean versions, fish, chicken or turkey.**

**Grill or steam instead of frying in oil.**





**“I have learnt how to eat regular, balanced meals even when I’m having a busy day. I always have breakfast, usually a bowl of low-sugar cereal and fruit. I make a sandwich for lunch which is cheaper and healthier than buying one. I chuck in as much lettuce or tomato as I can and have some fruit with it. For supper I throw together pasta, homemade sauce with lots of veg - I love carrots and onions - and sometimes chicken. I go for snacks of nuts, dried fruit and cereal bars”**

**Dan, 21, has had type 1 diabetes for 20 years.**

# SEX

**University is an opportunity to meet lots of new people and for some this means the start of sexual relationships.**

**Sex is an exercise. Keep carb nearby in case of a hypo and make sure your partner knows what to do if you have a hypo.**

**A 70kg man burns on average 98 calories for 20 minutes' sexual intercourse, while a 60kg female burns around 84 calories in this time.**

**People with diabetes are at just the same risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases as anyone else. To protect yourself use contraception such as condoms and the pill. There are no restrictions on what contraception diabetics can use. Advice is available free at sexual health clinics across the country.**

**For women, becoming pregnant with diabetes requires careful planning and tight blood glucose control. Accidental pregnancies are not advisable so always use contraception. It is vital that you contact your diabetes team if you are planning a pregnancy.**



# INSULIN

**You may be worried about keeping your insulin and medication safe in a shared fridge in halls.**

**Tell your neighbours about your condition and your need to keep your medication cool. They are more likely to help keep it safe if they understand.**

**Some Universities provide fridges for students with diabetes. It's worth asking at yours and it might encourage you to keep your own, healthier food.**

**You may want to change to a more flexible insulin regime at University; ask your diabetes team for advice.**



# SICK DAYS

It can be very miserable feeling ill at University without the comfort of your home bed, food and family support. Being unwell with diabetes can be particularly dangerous.

Register with a GP practice at your new University. If you can, book an induction with the diabetes specialist nurse in Fresher's week. It will be useful having someone close by who understands your diabetes. It may be easier to have your yearly diabetes checks in your University town rather than at home. However, you may prefer to keep your diabetes nurse from home, in which case you can keep in contact via email or phone.



When you are ill,  
**NEVER** stop doing  
your long-term  
insulin unless  
you've  
discussed it  
with your  
diabetes team.



When you're ill do blood glucose checks more regularly, about every 2-4 hours, and adjust your insulin/carb intake accordingly. You may need to do more short-term insulin if your blood glucose is high. Check urine/blood for ketones if possible as your body can produce them when you're ill.

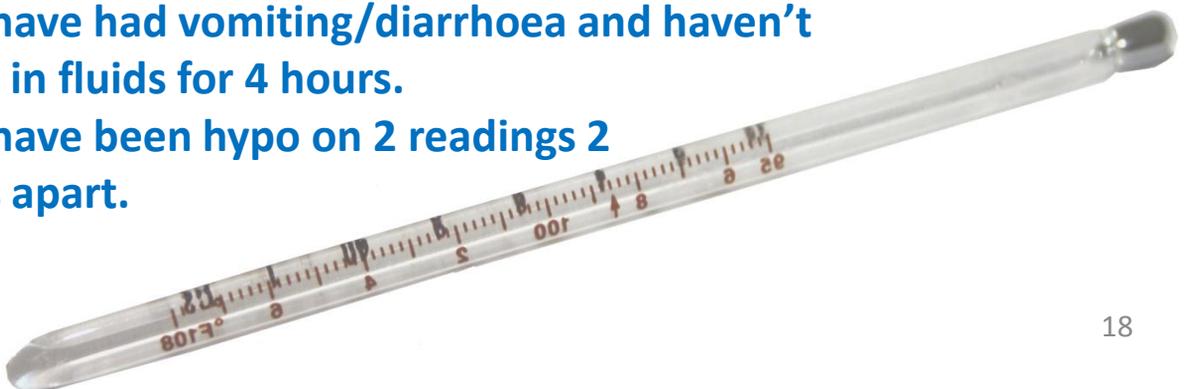
If you can't eat, this is about the only time when sugary drinks might be good for a diabetic! Perhaps get a friend to buy you a coke or lucozade, remove the fizz by stirring it and take small sips throughout the day and night to prevent a hypo and increase energy.

Drink plenty of water or sugar-free and decaffeinated fluids throughout the day to avoid dehydration, particularly if vomiting.

Remember that even though being poorly means your control can go haywire, always do your long-term dose of insulin as your body still needs it.

Don't ever be worried about calling your specialist nurse, doctor or hospital if you're worried. It is always better to get advice and be safe. Get help if:

- Blood glucose is more than 25 mmol/l.
- You have had ketones in your urine for more than 4 hours.
- You have had vomiting/diarrhoea and haven't taken in fluids for 4 hours.
- You have been hypo on 2 readings 2 hours apart.



# Acknowledgements

**Professor Polly Bingley**, Professor of diabetes .

**Dr Alexandra Ward**, Consultant endocrinologist, Bath RUH.

**Daniel Ahern**, Bristol University student.

**Emily Ashworth, Bristol University Medical School.**

**Feedback on this leaflet is welcome. [ea7968@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ea7968@bristol.ac.uk)**

# Advice and help

## Specialist nurse

Have the number for your specialist diabetes nurse handy as they are a good first point of call for questions and problems.

## Diabetes UK

020 74241000 [www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)

Diabetes information and advice.

## FRANK

0800 77 66 00 [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

Information about drug use.

## Alcohol Concern

020 7928 7377 [www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

Information about alcohol.

## Diabetes and Sport

[www.runsweet.com](http://www.runsweet.com)

# Glossary

**Carb** refers to carbohydrate.

**A hypo** is an episode of hypoglycaemia where blood glucose is less than about 4 mmol/l.