

# Take a Diabetes Vacation!

Diabetes care, as you well know, requires daily attention. It's no wonder that sometimes its constant management can wear a person down. When that happens, it's easy to ignore parts—or all—of your diabetes care routine. “Diabetes burnout” happens to everyone from time to time. A “Diabetes Vacation” is the natural next step, to take time from your daily routine to regroup, get a fresh perspective, and then begin again feeling renewed.

“In my own practice,” explains William Polonsky, MD, founder of the Diabetes Behavioral Institute and author of *Diabetes Burnout*. “I have met far too many people who, because of diabetes burnout, have chosen to ignore their diabetes for years or, in some cases, decades. They are male and female, young and old, new to diabetes and veterans of the disease. They are not bad, stupid, or weak people. They are normal folks who are struggling with diabetes for understandable reasons. And their struggles take many shapes.” Dr. Polonsky recommends

“diabetes vacations” to help curb or prevent burnout, but emphasizes the difference between a safe diabetes vacation and an unsafe break.

**“A safe vacation doesn't last too long and involves planning** ahead so your diabetes control isn't compromised,” explains Dr. Polonsky. “This doesn't mean quitting your diabetes care altogether. You might, for example, decide to take a night off each week from your diabetes-friendly meal plan. A good vacation can restore your energy for managing diabetes.”

**“An unsafe vacation from diabetes as something that goes on for a long time** and may threaten your health”, he says. “Perhaps you have been ignoring your diabetes for years, or you take your medications faithfully but decide you don't ever want to check your blood sugars again.”

For those stuck in a burnout phase that could easily be classified as unsafe, seeking help and support is crucial. If you can't admit to your healthcare team that you're severely struggling, tell a friend or family member whom you trust. Asking for help doesn't mean you have to suddenly snap out of your burnout. It just means you're going to acknowledge and work through it in a way that is safe, with the support that you need.

**Include your healthcare team** in a plan for moving from burnout to responsible diabetes management again is important. For instance, if you're burnt-out by trying to maintain an A1C near 7.0 percent, you can talk to your team about aiming for blood sugars that would lead to an 8.0 A1C instead for a period of time. The point is involving your team may be a comfortable way to lighten the burden and responsibilities of diabetes management while also keeping you safe. The more intense your burnout feels, the more necessary it may be to seek out professional help from a therapist who can support you.



**For a diabetes vacation** one good guideline is to do the very basics of your diabetes management responsibilities to keep you from having a crisis. These can include:

- ❑ Check your blood sugar less often. For some people that may be checking twice a day, twice a week, or just once a day, or some other frequency. If you see that it is you're your threshold of comfort, maybe 150 or 200 or 250, then check again later on to make sure it does not get too high.
- ❑ Talk to your healthcare provider about taking the least amount of medication that will keep you safe to avoid extreme highs or extreme lows.
- ❑ If possible, eat close to regular meal times, with lower carbohydrate, increased vegetables and proteins, with limited processed foods. This will help to stabilize your blood sugar with less medication.
- ❑ Aim for a good night's sleep. This where your body can get restored, so that you feel fresh and ready to take on the day. Do not take a "diabetes vacation" when your sleep is significantly disturbed.

Burnout is a personal experience—but is usually accompanied by a layer of shame and guilt. Others with diabetes may even become judgmental perceiving burnout as a weakness or giving up, but it's not that simple.

### **Turning Around Burnout**

While it's important to acknowledge and work through your own burnout, it's also crucial to do what's necessary to keep yourself safe and out of the hospital. In addition to the emergent dangers of DKA and severely high blood sugar levels, long-term burnout that leads to long-term high blood sugars increases your risk for all of the many diabetes complications you've been warned about: neuropathy, retinopathy, nephropathy. Rather than inspire change, this list of warnings can unfortunately make the burnout burden even worse.

One person said, "I firmly believe that diabetes burnout is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of being strong for too long. Be kind to yourself," she said. "It was always in the back of my mind that this trend couldn't go on forever but I needed time to let other things settle down first."

Can you avoid all stressors? Probably not. But you can let off a little steam when you're feeling diabetes-related stress—and that can help you stay on the steady. Taking some time to do enjoyable, healthy things—exercise, reading, gardening, volunteering—can certainly help.

