

Student name: Jacqueline Boahemaa

Student number: 2423860

Module code: BMHP5023

Lecturer: Chloe Harries

Supporting Patients with Type 2 Diabetes in Primary Care

Understanding Physiology, Self-Monitoring and Lifestyle Management

In recent years, working in general practice has meant seeing more patients diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. It rarely arrives dramatically. Often, it appears quietly in routine blood results. An HbA1c creeps up. A patient who feels “mostly fine” suddenly finds themselves labelled with a chronic condition. That moment can feel abstract to them. Numbers on a screen do not always translate into urgency or understanding.

Diabetes mellitus is a chronic metabolic disorder characterised by persistent hyperglycaemia, resulting from problems with insulin production, insulin action, or both (World Health Organization, 2023). Type 2 diabetes accounts for around 90% of diabetes cases in the UK (Diabetes UK, 2023). Unlike Type 1 diabetes, which is autoimmune, Type 2 diabetes develops gradually and is strongly associated with insulin resistance. In type 1 diabetes because the body struggles to produce insulin or no insulin, this balance must be manually recreated through injected or infused insulin.

The risk factors are well documented. Obesity, particularly central adiposity, sedentary behaviour, poor dietary patterns, smoking, increasing age, family history, and certain ethnic backgrounds all increase susceptibility (NICE, 2022). Yet listing these risk factors is one thing; understanding how they operate within real lives is another. A patient working long shifts, relying on convenience food, sleeping poorly, and feeling chronically stressed does not fit neatly into a bullet point.

Type 2 diabetes is not merely about elevated blood glucose. Over time, sustained hyperglycaemia contributes to vascular damage, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, nephropathy, neuropathy, and retinopathy (WHO, 2023). What often strikes me in clinic is how preventable much of this progression can be. But prevention requires understanding. Without it, lifestyle advice can feel abstract or even moralising.

Under normal physiological conditions, the body regulates blood glucose with remarkable precision. Fasting glucose levels are typically maintained between approximately 4 and 7 mmol/L. This stability reflects the coordinated activity of the endocrine pancreas, particularly the islets of Langerhans.

Within these islets, beta cells secrete insulin in response to rising blood glucose. Alpha cells release glucagon when glucose falls. The two hormones work in opposition, creating a dynamic equilibrium (Hall and Hall, 2021).

‘After a meal rich in carbohydrates, glucose enters the bloodstream. The pancreas senses this rise and releases insulin. Insulin binds to receptors on muscle and adipose tissue cells, stimulating the translocation of GLUT4 transporters to the cell membrane. Glucose then enters the cell, where it can be stored as glycogen or used for energy. Simultaneously, insulin suppresses hepatic glucose production by inhibiting gluconeogenesis.

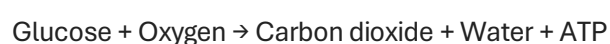
When blood glucose drops, perhaps overnight or between meals, glucagon stimulates the liver to break down glycogen and release glucose back into circulation. This feedback loop ensures continuous energy supply.

In Type 2 diabetes, however, tissues become resistant to insulin’s effects. The pancreas initially compensates by secreting more insulin. For a while, this works. Blood glucose may remain near normal despite significant metabolic strain. Over time, beta cells begin to fail. Insulin secretion declines. Glucose levels rise persistently (Roden and Shulman, 2019). The process is gradual. That gradual nature is both a challenge and an opportunity. It allows time for intervention, yet it also allows the condition to be ignored.

Glucose is not simply a number on a glucometer. It is fuel. Every cell depends on it to generate adenosine triphosphate, or ATP, the energy currency of the body.

Cellular respiration begins with glycolysis in the cytoplasm, where one molecule of glucose is broken down into two molecules of pyruvate. A small amount of ATP is produced at this stage. If oxygen is available, pyruvate enters the mitochondria and is converted to acetyl-CoA, entering the Krebs cycle. High-energy electron carriers generated here then feed into the electron transport chain, where oxidative phosphorylation occurs (Hall and Hall, 2021).

Oxygen serves as the final electron acceptor in this chain. Without it, ATP production falls dramatically. The overall process can be summarised simply by the chemical equation:



When insulin resistance prevents glucose from entering cells efficiently, cells cannot utilise this fuel optimally. Meanwhile, excess glucose remains in the bloodstream, contributing to glycation of

proteins and vascular damage (Brownlee, 2005). Over years, this contributes to microvascular complications such as retinopathy and nephropathy.

So, when discussing blood glucose with patients, it may help to frame it differently. This can be done we are not simply chasing numbers. We are protecting the delicate balance that allows cells to generate energy safely and efficiently. Patients can relate their glucose control to their usual bodily functions by relating concepts like insulin working as a team to provide energy. Therefore, they will find lifestyle changes such as food choices, physical activity levels, and time of medication relevant to their lifestyle choices. When patients perceive this connection to everyday functions, they are more likely to participate and take part in self-monitoring as a decision-making opportunity instead of mechanically self-monitoring for a task.

Recording and Tracking Blood Glucose in Type 2 Diabetes

Some patients question the value of monitoring blood glucose, particularly if they are not using insulin. That scepticism is understandable. Recording readings allows patients to observe patterns. A high postprandial reading after a large takeaway meal becomes tangible evidence of dietary impact. Conversely, noticing improved readings after a brisk 30-minute walk can reinforce positive behaviour.

Polonsky et al. (2017) found that structured monitoring combined with feedback significantly reduced HbA1c in patients with Type 2 diabetes. Yet monitoring without interpretation offers limited benefit. NICE (2022) advises that self-monitoring should be individualised and used as part of an agreed management plan.

From a nursing perspective, reviewing glucose diaries together can open meaningful conversations. Instead of abstract advice, discussions become collaborative. What happened on Tuesday evening? Why might that reading have been higher? These discussions build insight rather than compliance.

There are limits. For some individuals, frequent monitoring increases anxiety. Others may misinterpret occasional fluctuations as failure. Individuals must always overcome knowledge barriers, meaning they should understand the results and how they can work to improve those results they have been given. Therefore, education must accompany monitoring. The goal is awareness, not obsession.

Lifestyle Modification and Evidence-Based Recommendations

Lifestyle change remains central to managing Type 2 diabetes. Medication plays an important role, but without behavioural adjustments, pharmacological treatment often escalates over time. Behaviour adjustments impact diet choice as regular intake of high sugar carbohydrates increases blood glucose levels worsening insulin resistance. By focusing on their behaviour some individuals can work better to focus on their physical activity to improve their insulin sensitivity. Moreover, Pharmacological treatment can be used when lifestyle changes is not enough, there are many different types such as metformin, sulfonylureas and even SGLT2.

Weight Reduction

Excess adiposity, particularly visceral fat, exacerbates insulin resistance. The direct trial demonstrated that substantial weight loss through structured dietary intervention led to remission of Type 2 diabetes in a significant proportion of participants (Lean et al., 2018). Remission here means achieving normoglycaemia without glucose-lowering medication.

Yet sustained weight loss is difficult. It requires more than willpower. Socioeconomic context, psychological factors, and cultural norms all shape eating patterns. In practice, modest goals may be more realistic. Even a 5–10% reduction in body weight can meaningfully improve glycaemic control (NICE, 2022).

Dietary Adjustments

Dietary modification should move beyond simplistic carbohydrate restriction. Increasing fibre intake, reducing refined carbohydrates, and incorporating elements of a Mediterranean dietary pattern have demonstrated benefits (Esposito et al., 2020).

Patients often respond better to concrete examples than abstract macronutrient percentages. Swapping white bread for wholegrain. Replacing sugary breakfast cereals with oats and berries. Cooking with olive oil instead of butter. Small substitutions accumulate.

However, dietary advice must remain culturally sensitive. Recommending foods that are inaccessible or unfamiliar risks disengagement. Clinics can work within traditional eating terms patterns such as identifying healthier substitutions that respect the cultural norms of the person. Individuals must feel respected and acknowledged which means that all other problems should be taken into consideration. This links to collaborative goal setting which is very important. This can include asking patients what they eat and enjoy as well as what creates partnership rather than just prescription. Dietary change in type 2 diabetes is consistency and culturally appropriate improvements that reduce glycaemic variability.

Physical Activity

Exercise enhances insulin sensitivity independently of weight loss (Colberg et al., 2016).

Mechanistically, muscle contractions stimulate glucose uptake via insulin-independent pathways, increasing GLUT4 transporter activity.

In practical terms, this means movement matters even if weight remains stable. A 20-minute walk after dinner can lower postprandial glucose levels. Resistance training improves muscle mass, which increases glucose disposal capacity. Even light activity, after meals like walking, gentle cycling or even household chores can cut glucose spikes.

Importantly, the benefit of exercise is immediate, a single session can significantly improve glucose uptake for up to 24 hours. Long term changes can lead to structural changes in muscle and metabolism in which long lasting improvement is provided. For people with type 2 diabetes their goal shouldn't be extreme workouts, things like regular and sustainable movements with a combination of aerobic activity.

Individuals can be encouraged to participate in weight loss groups, to ensure they feel more connected with people who share similar problems. They would need to consider their medical safety as they would not want their blood glucose to drop too low leading to a risk of hypoglycaemia. Entering the correct programme would be well suited for the individual as it would aim to adhere to both their physical and mental wellbeing. Steady and balanced diets in which is very nutritious would be needed rather than extreme dieting. Solely focused on cutting out all carbohydrates.

The challenge lies in sustainability. Telling someone to exercise 150 minutes which is 2 hours and 30 minutes in total per week is easy. Supporting them to integrate activity into shift work, caregiving responsibilities, or chronic pain is harder.

Smoking Cessation

Smoking raises the risk factors for a future heart condition as well as increases insulin resistance, as stated by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023). Developing a significant total cardiovascular burden in all patients with diabetes due to combined vascular complications means that quitting smoking is one of the most effective means of lowering or reducing the risk of developing heart disease and/or other forms of vascular disease. Nicotine acts on the body by causing activation of the

sympathetic nervous system and thereby increasing blood pressure and heart rates. The effects of smoking on diabetes risk can be seen in the CDC where smokers have an approximately 30-40% greater chance of developing Type 2 diabetes than individuals who do not smoke. This statistic suggests that the greater the amount of smoking done, the greater the chance of developing type 2 diabetes.

Yet quitting smoking involves behavioural and psychological complexity. Many individuals may struggle to give up this as it helps reduce their anxiety despite this its impacts are extremely harmful. Smoking increase insulin resistance, as smoking makes the body less sensitive to insulin, this then means blood glucose is harder to control. It also worsens the bodies circulation, it damages blood vessels, making it easier for poor wound healing. Brief advice is insufficient. Referral to structured cessation services and pharmacological aids improves success rates.

The medical community describes Type 2 diabetes in simple terms as a combination of insulin resistance and inadequate beta-cell function, but that's only a partial description of what's happening in the life of someone with Type 2 diabetes. All the elements of a person's life experience relate to the development of Type 2 diabetes, and those experiences are shaped by a person's habits, environment and social determinants of health. When maintaining healthy blood glucose levels, insulin and glucagon must work in harmony at the cellular level to produce ATP from glucose and oxygen; over time high levels of glucose will lead to the gradual damage of body tissue and blood vessels. Monitoring blood glucose regularly will allow an individual to increase his/her level of self-awareness and participation and this is further enhanced through educational support. Individual health outcomes can be improved by changing lifestyle habits; weight control, healthier eating, increasing physical activity and quitting smoking will improve individual health outcomes and may even lead to remission in some individuals. As practice nurses, our role is not limited to simply giving results or adjusting medications, our role is to provide an understanding of physiology in terms that a person can understand.

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