

# Educating yourself about diabetes is key

**Deborah Condon** speaks to Nicola O'Hanlon about her diabetes journey so far



*Nicola O'Hanlon was diagnosed with Type 1 when she was seven years old*

Nicola O'Hanlon from Wexford was just seven years old when she was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, but despite that being 38 years ago, she remembers everything "vividly".

At the time, she displayed some of the typical symptoms of Type 1, such as drinking a lot of fluids and weight loss.

"I remember crying for food and feeling so weak, and just not having a clue what was going on," she recalls.

Nicola's mother brought her to the GP, who suspected diabetes. As there was no paediatric unit in Wexford at that time, she was sent to Waterford Regional Hospital, where she spent the next three weeks.

"I remember thinking I just have to get on with this. The nurse taught me how to inject with an orange and I remember

injecting myself and to this day, my mother has never had to inject me. I really just took it on board.

"However, in some ways I was too mature for my age and I think it came back to bite me. While my mam helped me manage it, I felt it was mine and I had to look after it. The enormity of it was huge and back in those days, the psychological aspect wasn't considered. I struggled later as a result," she says.

These struggles were particularly apparent in her teen years, which she describes as "very tough".

"Many people's diabetes management in their teens can be quite volatile and I got to the stage where I felt embarrassed about it, so I'd hide my insulin. I didn't want to be different. I would hide in the toilet when I had to inject," she notes.

During this time, she says she struggled with mental health issues, but she did not link this to her diabetes.

"I just thought I was an angry, angsty teen, but looking back, diabetes was a massive issue for me. You have all this stuff going on as a teen anyway and then you add diabetes to the mix. I realise looking back the impact it had on me," she says.

As an adult, Nicola had a positive approach to her health – eating healthily and exercising regularly. She got married in her mid-20s and had two children, a son who is now 19 and a daughter who is now 14.

"I had a lot of anxiety around pregnancy. Blood sugars are never off your mind anyway, but even more so when you are pregnant. I would worry that something

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would be wrong with the babies,” she points out.

Nicola says she has managed her diabetes well throughout her 20s, 30s and now 40s. She does not use any technology but says she is open to it.

“I have asked about CGMs twice, but was refused and have hit a brick wall really. There seems to be a huge disparity in diabetes care throughout Ireland and I have heard mixed messages about them, so there doesn’t seem to be a proper discussion going on about technology,” she notes.

Nicola works as a healthcare assistant in a nursing home.

“I really enjoy it and I find living with a long-term illness makes you more empathetic toward people who are ill. You also have a good understanding about things like nutrition and complications, which adds to your expertise.

“Quite a few of the residents have diabetes and they can talk to me about it because there is a certain language around diabetes that other people may not be familiar with,” she points out.

### Support groups

When asked if she avails of support groups, Nicola admits that she attended her first ever support group only in 2019.

“It had been arranged in a hotel in

Wexford by Diabetes Ireland and a huge group of people turned up. Until then, I didn’t know a single other person in Wexford with diabetes,” she recalls.

The group had been planning to meet up again, but then Covid-19 hit and everything changed.

“We had set up a WhatsApp group and we really needed it at that point because we were able to discuss our fears and the mixed messages out there.

“Nobody was sure what we should be doing. There was heightened anxiety, which was not helped by conflicting guidelines. We were all paranoid about keeping our blood glucose levels as normal as possible,” she says.

### Menopause

Nicola had another reason to be particularly careful. In March, she underwent a hysterectomy, so the start of the pandemic coincided with her recovery period. This has highlighted an area for her that she feels is forgotten when it comes to diabetes – menopause.

“There is lots of information about diabetes, but the discussion around women with Type 1 just seems to stop when they are coming into menopause. There is a whole array of issues associated with this, such as the impact of hormones on your blood glucose levels.

It would be helpful if there was more discussion around menopause because it is not widely spoken about at all,” she insists.

Nicola undergoes diabetes checks every nine months, but can contact her nursing team any time that she needs to. She believes that educating yourself about diabetes is key, whether you have the condition yourself or are the parent of a child with Type 1.

“Researching and understanding this disease is paramount – don’t give your power away too much. Absolutely take the advice of doctors but always be able to have a conversation around best practices when it comes to Type 1 treatments. And never discount the psychological, mental, emotional trauma that can come with having a lifelong illness,” she says.

For the parents of children with Type 1, Nicola believes that there is a grieving process when they discover their child has the condition, but that this can be lessened by open conversations and honesty about how you feel.

“Support is essential. The child is paramount and peer support for them is important, but everybody in the family is affected and that needs to be addressed too,” she adds.



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