

# After School: Tune In, or Tone Up?

by Gary Scheiner MS, CDE

It's 3 o'clock. The school bell rings, waking you from a sound sleep in your final class of the day. All that pent-up energy from a day of quality education suddenly comes to life as you dart out the door and toward your bus. Some kid with snot running down his nose is in your usual seat, so you're forced to share a seat with Big Willie Johnson – a monster of a kid whose claim to fame is that he once choked down 250 tater tots in a single lunch period.

Is it your imagination, or are the bus seats getting smaller? Maybe it's Big Willie's big rear end, or maybe it's the fact that you've put on a few pounds yourself. Whatever it is, you have more important things to worry about. Like that big math test tomorrow (am I *ever* going to use this stuff in the *real* world?), followed by that glorious trip to the doctor's office for the semi-annual "Pick on me because my blood sugars are too high" festival. Then mom will get that look in her eye and tell you everything you should and shouldn't eat. Oh joy.

As you walk through your front door, two thoughts enter your mind: "MUST GET FOOD," and "Where's the stupid remote

control?" What follows is a typical afternoon of brain & body numbness in front of the TV. Sound familiar? If so, there are two people you should meet.

## DEENA

Deena was a 10-year-old 5<sup>th</sup> grader who had insulin-dependent (Type-1) diabetes since she was born. For years, her after school thing involved countless hours of cartoons. The closest she ever got to actual physical activity was playing with her Barbie Tennis Ensemble.

The fact that her blood sugars were in the 200's and 300's most of the time bothered her, but not enough to do anything about it. That is, until her doctor told her that she was beginning to develop diabetic eye disease (background retinopathy). At that point, she made the decision to start taking better care of herself. One of the first things she did was to start going to the Y after school to swim and learn gymnastics.

Today, Deena is 17. Her diabetes still isn't perfectly controlled, but it is much better than it used to be. She is on her

high school swim team, and best of all, she has a terrific bunch of friends, most of whom she met at the Y.

## MALIK

A self-proclaimed computer genius, 13-year-old Malik spent his afternoons hacking, snacking, and playing Nintendo. His diabetes doctor told him time and time again that he was at a high risk of diabetic complications like heart and kidney disease if he didn't lose weight and get his blood sugars under control. His parents even got him a slick looking motorized treadmill, which he used mainly for hanging up dirty laundry.

After a particularly embarrassing day in gym class (nobody knew shorts could split like that), Malik looked in the mirror and decided to use his creative powers for good rather than evil. He built a special panel out of clipboards and making tape and rigged it up so he can play Nintendo – and even use his computer keyboard and mouse – all while walking on his treadmill.

These days, Malik spends a lot of his time with his girlfriend,

Gina. He's managed to work himself into pretty decent shape (Gina says she's "hot for his bod"). He's by no means a star athlete, but he can at least hold his own in most sports. And his doctor, who happens to have put on a few pounds herself, has finally stopped bugging him to lose weight and get his sugars under control.

## **CHOICES**

What's this all about? Choices. Plain and simple choices. Having diabetes means that we make lots of choices everyday – to eat Frosted Flakes or Cheerios. To check the blood sugar or blow it off. To be physically active, or basically to do nothing.

Like it or not, we have to answer for the choices we make. They each come with certain drawbacks as well as certain rewards. Being a lazy goober means that you are probably going to gain weight, be tired all the time, perform poorly in physical activities, and have blood sugars that are difficult to control – all for the sake of conserving precious energy. Being active means that you have to expend some time and energy, but it also means that you will probably stay in good shape, be more alert, have more friends, have more fun, and be less likely to develop complications from your diabetes in the years ahead.

If you haven't been active for a while and are a little hesitant about jumping into something with the super-jocks, don't sweat it. Either find a program designed for beginners, or start getting into shape on your own. One of the nicest things about being young is the abundance of options available to you:

### Organized Sports

Besides getting involved in varsity or intramural sports at your school, you can go to your local YMCA, Jewish Community Center, Health Club, or Recreation Department for various clubs, leagues, and lessons. Martial arts are another good option for people of all ages and abilities.

### Disorganized Sports

Who says you need a bunch of coaches, equipment and silly rules to have a good time? Get together with your friends after school and PLAY – and I don't mean Super Mario Brothers. Head outside for some soccer, Whiffle ball, basketball, kickball, volleyball, street hockey, or ultimate Frisbee. (Does anybody remember a game called "SPUD"?) If there aren't a lot of people around, talk a friend into going for a walk, jog, or bike ride with you, or perhaps playing a few games of tennis or ping-pong.

### Do-It-Yourself Fitness

If you really have an inborn love for watching TV, using your computer or playing video games, there's no reason you can't stay home and do those things. Just try to get your butt moving while doing them – walk on a treadmill, ride a stationary bike or use a stair climber. Many of my patients make good use of Velcro when they work out, using it to attach the remote control to their exercise equipment!

Other options include in-line skating, weight training and using rowing or ski machines (Nordic track) – all of which can be used to the beat of your latest CDs. If you're the type who gets pumped up watching other people sweat, pop a good aerobics video into your VCR and join the action.

### Workforce Workouts

One sure-fire way to get your parents good and frustrated is to show a little independence. An after-school job that has you on the move – such as delivering newspapers, stocking store shelves, bussing tables or mowing lawns – doesn't just put a few extra bucks in your pocket. It helps you to stay in good shape and lower your blood sugar levels.

## **BLOOD SUGAR TIPS**

Don't let diabetes stand in the way of what you want to do, but don't ignore it either.

Regardless of what you want to do and when you want to do it, there are ways to make your blood sugar work out. Here are a few of the tricks I used to use:

First, always check your blood sugar right after school. Besides telling you if you need to snack before starting your activity, it will tell you how that “mystery meat” you had for lunch affected your blood sugar level. If your sugars are running high or low all the time after school, tell your parents and doctor about it so that you can come up with a plan for getting it under better control. The solution may be as simple as adjusting your morning long-acting or lunchtime regular insulin. By the way, better blood sugars in the afternoon are guaranteed to help you to stay more alert, even during the most dreadfully boring classes.

Second, have a snack if you don't think your sugar is high enough to last until dinner. This will be different for everyone, based on what you plan to do, how long you plan to do it, how much insulin you took earlier, and what your own experience is with different types of activities. Before going to basketball practice, I used to have an apple or a half-pint of milk if my blood sugar was less than 150. And if it was really high, like in the 300s or 400s, I'd check my urine for ketones before going to practice.

One time I practiced even though I had really high blood sugar. Not only did I have a terrible practice, but my sugar went up to 510 by dinnertime. My parents wanted to take me to the hospital! It ended up that my bottle of insulin had gone bad, and all I had to do was take some fresh insulin. I learned my lesson. From then on, if I had really high blood sugars and any ketones in my urine, I'd call my doctor before trying to exercise.

Third, have something with you while you're working out in case you get low blood sugar. Fluids such as juice, regular soda or Gatorade work very well for raising blood sugar in a hurry. But don't overdo it – ½ cup to a cup should be plenty. If you're exercising for a long time, it's a good idea to have a small snack at least every hour just to tide you over until dinner. A blood sugar check at the midway point isn't a bad idea either. If you continue to have low blood sugars despite eating extra food (or if your goal is to lose weight, and you don't want to have to eat any more than you have to), talk to your doctor about reducing your insulin dose when you are physically active.

Last but not least, let your friends, teammates, and coaches know that you have diabetes. It's nothing to be ashamed of; a lot of them might

even think it's cool that you know how to take injections and check your blood sugar on your own. Explain to them what it means to get low blood sugar, and how you might look if you have it (sweaty, shaky, uncoordinated, confused, just acting “funny”). Let them know where you keep your stash of emergency food, and how much to give to you if you need it. It's also a good idea to wear medical identification that says you have diabetes. My Medic Alert bracelet has actually held up better than I have through some pretty rough activities. For more information, call the Medic Alert foundation at 1-800-432-5378.

## **IT'S NOT JUST YOUR PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY**

What did Deena and Malik have in common? Besides being young and having diabetes, they both took responsibility for their own health and well-being. Believe it or not, the person who has ultimate responsibility isn't your parents, and it isn't your doctor. It's YOU.

Sure, your doctor can answer questions and give you some excellent guidance. And even your parents can be a tremendous help from time to time in getting you the equipment and transportation you need. But the ultimate responsibility for doing what it

takes to keep yourself healthy is in your hands. We all like to be treated like an adult, here's your big chance to show everyone what you can do when given a chance to make your own choices. To show just how much you know, here's a quickie quiz:

It's 3 o'clock. The school bell rings. Which is probably the *worst* thing you can do?

- a) Check your sugar, have a snack, and head out to soccer practice.
- b) Ride your bike over to your friend's house and throw the Frisbee around.
- c) Read up on the latest 90210 babes (or chicks) while walking on a treadmill.
- d) Settle into the sofa for another invigorating afternoon of cartoons and Cheetos.

Duh. That one's a no-brainer.

*editor's note: Gary Scheiner, M.S. is an exercise physiologist and diabetes educator at the Joslin Center for Diabetes at Wills and Jefferson hospitals in Philadelphia. He has Type-I diabetes, and manages it with daily exercise, a healthy diet, and insulin pump therapy.*