

Two Television Stars, Two Types of Diabetes... and numerous Real-life management Challenges

By Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer and Gary Scheiner, MS, CDE

The life of Hollywood stars may look glamorous to us on the outside—the money, the parties, the fame—but beneath the surface of the celebrity lifestyle are regular human beings, just like the rest of us, who often face the same kinds of challenges in their day-to-day lives. In fact, for those of us who are among the United States' 17 million and counting people living with diabetes, being a star holds no protection from dealing with the chronic demands of this serious disease.

Take the case of two popular television stars—Aida Turtorro and Elliott Yamin—each of whom is confronting the challenges of living with diabetes even as they find success in their entertainment careers. For Aida, an Emmy-nominated actress who plays Tony Soprano's sister Janice on HBO's hit series *The Sopranos*, being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes several years ago filled her life with plenty of real-life drama. And for Elliott Yamin—one of the final three contestants on Fox's 2006 season of *American Idol*, and now a popular recording artist—success has come to him only since he's been able

to get his Type 1 diabetes under better control.

The following are some of the struggles that Aida and Elliott have experienced in their diabetes management, with advice from author and CDE Gary Scheiner. Our hope is that learning about their off-screen challenges can help you those of you who face similar "diabetes drama."

Aida: From Denial to Advocacy

Star of both stage and screen, Aida Turtorro has spent the last six years playing the tough-as-nails sister of mob boss Tony Soprano—a character who does not shy away from confronting her domineering brother. But when she was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes five years ago, Aida was not prepared to get tough with diabetes and instead used denial as a defense mechanism from facing what having this disease would mean in her life. "I just wasn't paying attention to the diagnosis," Aida explains. "I wasn't watching what I was eating, exercising or doing the things that I know now I have to do. I wasn't checking my (blood sugar) numbers regularly. I just went on as I did before (the diagnosis)." Though diabetes is

prevalent in Aida's family—her mother and aunt had it and two of her grandparents died from diabetes complications--Aida remembers that it wasn't really talked about. "I knew diabetes was in the family, but I didn't know what living with diabetes meant," she explains.

“Keeping diabetes out of family conversations and activities is very common, especially soon after the diagnosis, explains Gary, a Type-1 diabetic since age 18. “Often, people with diabetes are either *fearful* about what having diabetes might hold in store (long-term complications) and prefer to not think or talk about it, or *ashamed* about having diabetes, thinking it makes them appear sick, weak or different in the eyes of others. For some people, it takes months or even years to get over the fear or shame, which is unfortunate, because problems are more likely when diabetes is ignored. Usually, all it takes is some self-management education to get over the fear, and some interaction with other people who live with diabetes (in-person or via the internet or shows such as “dLife”) to get past the shame.”

Over the course of her first year, Aida was exhausted from her blood sugars spiraling up and down. She was not in control of her diabetes, and despite feeling lousy physically and emotionally (she remembers having terrible mood swings), she still wasn't ready to face her new disease. Fortunately, Aida was seeing a doctor who made her confront her denial. Looking over her A1C results with her, the doctor asked, "Do you understand what it means to *not* take care of diabetes? Do you know what will happen to you?"

"Something clicked when he said that to me," she recalls. "I didn't want to get complications...no one does." From that appointment on, Aida took steps to take charge of her diabetes. She saw a nutritionist who helped her learn about healthy eating and she began to exercise regularly. Aida began feeling better. Still, her blood sugars were not in the healthy range that she was striving for. With the help of a new endocrinologist, Aida realized that the oral medication that she had been taking was not helping her enough. She decided to go on insulin and she started taking Lantus. This began her path to more successful blood sugar management.

"Lantus is a great choice for people on oral medications who need to make the

transition to insulin," explains Gary. "It only needs to be taken once a day. And unlike the older insulins which had a significant "peak" of action, Lantus' action is steady and constant, so it is much less likely to cause low blood sugar (hypoglycemia).

Even on this new road to better control, Aida still acknowledges the daily challenges of living with diabetes. One of her biggest challenges is eating healthy. "It's a daily struggle and I'm not perfect," Aida admits. But she is working hard to try and eat a balanced diet. She makes dates to go produce shopping and cooking with close friends and tries to focus on eating vegetables that she really loves, like zucchini and escarole cooked with garlic. With her busy life—especially when "The Sopranos" is taping or when she's working on a film or play—Aida finds that she really needs to schedule food shopping so that she's not relying on just grabbing something to eat when she's hungry. She still seeks the help of a nutritionist from time to time to help her work with the nuances of carbohydrate counting. "Carbs are challenging!" she admits

According to Gary, "Carb counting is a valuable tool for everyone with diabetes, whether they take insulin, oral medication, or nothing at

all. Carbohydrates are what make blood sugar levels rise in the short term, so learning to manage carbohydrate intake (starches as well as sugars) is essential for improving blood sugar control."

Having once been living in diabetes denial, Aida has now come full circle and proudly counts herself as a diabetes advocate. She has traveled around the country, visiting hospitals and diabetes centers to speak to other people living with diabetes about taking charge of their disease. "It helps me to speak out," Aida says. "It gives me support, talking about diabetes and connecting to other people living with it." Aida acknowledges that she is not perfect in her diabetes management and that every day can still be a struggle. Yet, she now sees diabetes as something that can be managed—and must be, in order to live a healthy life. "Having diabetes is not an easy road," she says. "But I am speaking out about it to show other people that it can be tackled. There is help out there."

Elliott Yamin: Idol & Inspiration

When *American Idol* star Elliott Yamin turned 16, his thoughts were focused on the same thing that all of his friends were thinking about, too: getting a driver's license (I thought most 16-year-old boys

were thinking about getting something else! But don't put that in the final edit). But getting a Type 1 diabetes diagnosis shortly after his 16th birthday forced Elliott into thinking about insulin shots and blood sugar checks instead. "I was 16 and rebellious at the time," 27-year-old Elliott recalls. "I was a normal teen and I wanted to stay that way—I didn't want to think about diabetes."

Elliott had been going through a hard time even before the diagnosis; his parents had divorced two years earlier and Elliott was struggling with whether or not to stay in high school (he eventually dropped out and then went for his GED). Diabetes felt like one burden too many, and so Elliott chose to ignore it. "There were times that I skipped taking my insulin shots. I passed out a lot. I got to know the ER," Elliott remembers.

Says Gary, "Ironically, the best way to look different in the eyes of your peers is to have a lot of low blood sugars or spend half you time in the bathroom. Most teens learn soon enough that the best way to fit in and not miss out is to take care of the diabetes first."

Fortunately, one of those trips to the ER was the wake-up call that Elliott needed. He work up, and saw his mother—who also has diabetes—sitting and

crying. "It made me cry, to see her cry," Elliott says. For anyone who watched Elliott on *American Idol*, they know that his mother Claudette is a huge supporter of her son. "When I saw that what I was doing to myself was upsetting her this way, I knew I couldn't let diabetes control my life this way. I began checking my blood sugars more and taking my shots regularly," he explains.

Elliott's diabetes management improved even more when he later learned about the benefits of insulin pump therapy from a co-worker who was on the pump. Taken by the flexibility and ease of taking insulin through a pump, Elliott decided to see the endocrinologist that his co-worker was seeing, who encouraged Elliott to go on the pump. "Going on the pump was a huge life change for me," Elliott says. "It's so much better for my lifestyle to push a button to take insulin instead of taking three or four syringes a day. Pump therapy makes it so much easier for me to gage how much insulin I need."

"Despite all the benefits that pump therapy offers, many physicians still are not comfortable with them," explains Gary. "If you're willing/able to check your blood sugar at least four times a day, put up with multiple daily injections, count carbs and adjust your insulin doses properly, there is no reason not

to consider a pump. If your doctor does not support your interest in a pump and can't give you a valid reason, it may be time to find a doctor who is more comfortable with them."

For Elliott's life in the last year, pump therapy has proved extremely important to maintaining tight control despite a very varied schedule, heightened stress, and unpredictable meal times. Elliott is thankful that he got set up and comfortable with his pump before the *American Idol* experience began. Despite all of the adrenaline pumping through his body on *Idol* performance or result show nights, Elliott never had a low blood sugar on stage. "It was close a couple of times, but I always caught it," he says.

Now that Elliott has officially entered the rock star lifestyle, he is diligent about staying healthy even when out on the road. "When we're at a hotel (while touring), I'll use the fitness center or pool or just do push-ups or jumping jacks in my room. I'll get out a football and throw it around with the guys when we have some downtime," he says.

Elliott was also fortunate to have someone who could truly understand his diabetes needs during the *American Idol* show and tour: contestant Kevin Couvais, 16, also has Type 1 diabetes.

“Kevin and I shared diabetes battle stories,” Elliott says. “It was really helpful to have him around.”

Elliott also makes sure that everyone around him knows about his diabetes, and knows what to do in case of an emergency—just in case. He has not visited an ER for a long time, but wants to play it safe, nonetheless.

“That’s a really important message. Most people who are not educated about diabetes will think you’re high or drunk if your blood sugar is high or low and you start acting funny. Nobody says you have to teach people all the million nuances of your diabetes management, but sharing a few key points about symptoms/treatment for highs & lows can be worth its weight in gold.

Like Aida, Elliott is using his celebrity status to speak out about and reach other people living with diabetes—especially young people. During the “meet and greet” time before the *American Idol* tour performances would begin, Elliott was often approached by young people who wanted to show him their pumps and thank him for being open about having Type 1 diabetes. “The sheer number of people who would come to the tour so they could talk to me about their diabetes was amazing,” he says. “Kids and parents would

thank me for speaking out and I get tons of letters and email from people with diabetes who want to connect.”

As the *American Idol* tour draws to a close and Elliott returns to Los Angeles to record his debut solo album, he is figuring out how he can speak out about diabetes in a more formal way and has already begun working with the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

His message to young people is simple. He says, “Anyone can have a normal life, even with diabetes. Diabetes takes time and dedication: be positive. Be aware of your body. See the big picture.”

Editor’s note:

Gary Scheiner is a Certified Diabetes Educator with a private practice near Philadelphia. Having had diabetes for more than 20 years, he helps educate and manage people with diabetes throughout the world phone and Internet. If you have questions about your diabetes, feel free to contact Gary at 877-735-3648, or visit his web site, www.integrateddiabetes.com