

Having a life with diabetes



This is a new page aimed at diabetics in their late teens and early twenties. Nic Reade is a 31 year old who was 16 when she was diagnosed with type 1. Her style is deliberately frank and light-hearted but also offers up some practical advice. For medical queries please ask your diabetes team.

I was 16 when I was diagnosed with type 1, so was still a bit of a newbie by the time I got to university age, the time in many young peoples' lives when alcohol becomes a bit more of a key player in your social life.

I'd read that alcohol could make your blood sugars plummet, so my usual routine on a Saturday night would be to sneak into the kitchen and wolf down a couple of chocolate biscuits. I was still living at home so I needed to be a bit covert about this or there would be questions asked about why the chocolate biscuit supplies were declining!

So – basically, that's how I used to handle T1 and drinking. Get the sugars nice and high, get drunk, eat food at the party/on the way home, but always take my night time injection. Somehow this vaguely worked for me all the way through my late teens and early twenties. I've got lots of friends who weren't so lucky though, most of whom have had to go to the A&E once or twice with ketoacidosis (never normally hypos). I say 'vaguely' worked, because my HbA1cs were always around 9 or 10.

So – if I were to live my uni days again, what would I do differently? First of all I'd chuck the biscuits and high BGs routine. Combined with drinking fattening alcohol, this led to me putting on quite a few kilos. I still reckon it's probably a good idea to have your BGs at around 10 though while drinking, to be on the safe side.

Secondly, I'd definitely make sure I took my BG meter out with me. They're much smaller and cooler-looking nowadays and you can fit them even in the smallest of handbags with a few test strips and the rest of your stuff. I'd also take glucose tablets. I always used to rely on being able to get a lemonade, but if you're at a bar it can be a bit of a wait to get a drink and that's not cool when you're hypo.

I'd also drink less beer. Because beer's full of carbs it's not only fattening, but it's hellish on your BGs. Wine is better; clear spirits even better still. It's easy to drink vodka and diet coke at a bar, but I still wish they had diet lemonade so you can have a bit more variety in drinks. I got into drinking vodka, lime and soda for a bit but got sick of checking if it was lime cordial (bad) or Roses lime (good). The annoying thing about parties (as opposed to bars) is if you leave your diet mixers in the kitchen with everyone else's, there's always someone who fancies using it for their drink. When the diet stuff runs out, you can't move onto sugary stuff – they can switch between the two. Annoying.

I used to avoid telling people I was T1 when I was out drinking because I didn't want them to judge me. However, I nearly always had my best mate by my side who was well-versed in what to do if I went low. It wouldn't have been a bad idea to tell a couple more people though, in retrospect, given that being hypo and being drunk can sometimes look like the same thing.

I recently read a book written by a 23 year old English guy who got T1 at 13. It's called "Joe's Rough Guide to Diabetes". At 23, he's had a bit of hands-on experience with parties, and does a whole chapter on alcohol (and a bit on cigarettes and illegal drugs). He approaches each situation well – not as a kill-joy, but with some degree of sensibility. I'd highly recommend.

Overall – it's gonna be hard to avoid alcohol, and all of us (diabetic or not) make a mess of it at least once in our lives. Just try to keep safe, and overall, make sure you keep taking your injections and always carry glucose with you. Party on!

For more stories from Nic visit her blog at www.beingdiabetic.co.nz

