

# HAVING DIABETES IN PRISON

A guide to prison healthcare  
for prisoners and their families



**DiABETES UK**  
KNOW DIABETES. FIGHT DIABETES.

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# WELCOME

## **This guide tells you how prison healthcare works if you have diabetes and are 18 or over.**

You'll find out which diabetes health checks you should be getting. And what to do if you aren't getting the care you need from your prison healthcare team.

There's information on taking insulin and medication – including asking for insulin in-possession. And what to do if you're having problems getting your insulin doses.

Use our tips on eating a healthy diet and keeping more active to help look after your blood sugar levels and improve your mood.

If you're finding it hard to look after your blood sugar levels, you'll find details about tech devices.

If you or your family or friends want to get in touch, our contact details are on the last page of this guide.

**Always trust your instincts. If you don't feel right and don't know why, ask a prison officer if you can speak to a healthcare professional to stop you becoming unwell.**

# Your introduction to prison healthcare

On your first day in prison, you should have an appointment with a member of the prison healthcare team.

## **They should:**

- Talk to you about your diabetes and how you look after it.
- Ask you about any diabetes medication you're taking.
- Make sure you have the next dose of your diabetes medication.
- Book you an appointment with a healthcare professional who can prescribe more medication.
- Book appointments with any clinics you need to look after your diabetes.
- Give you advice on how to contact prison health services and book a GP appointment.
- Ask your consent for transfer of your medical records from your GP to the prison healthcare service.

Within seven days of being in prison you should get a basic health check which includes a urine test.

Source:

**[nice.org.uk/guidance/ng57](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng57)**

## **If you need specialist or emergency care**

Prisons do not have hospitals but many have a health wing with inpatient beds. Most problems should be dealt with by the prison healthcare team. If they cannot deal with a medical problem, the prison:

- May get an expert to visit the prison.
- May arrange for treatment in an outside hospital – although you'd still be under the care of the Prison Service.
- May move you to another prison with different healthcare facilities.

## **What to do if you can't get healthcare**

If you don't get seen by the healthcare team straightaway and need to see a doctor, speak to a prison officer to find out the arrangements.

# What happens if your diabetes is diagnosed in prison

**Nine out of 10 people with diabetes have type 2 diabetes. It can be picked up by healthcare staff during a routine health check in prison.**

That's because lots of people can live with it for years without knowing because they don't have obvious symptoms.

Whatever type of diabetes you are diagnosed with, you should be given lots of advice, information and support to help you look after it.

If you have type 2 diabetes and your healthcare team don't think a healthy diet and being more active will be enough to help you look after your blood sugar levels, they may also put you on medication. This can include tablets such as metformin or injectable medication like insulin or a combination.

Looking after yourself and your blood sugar levels are important to help slow down or prevent long-term health problems that can be caused by diabetes. These are known as diabetes complications.

We have lots of free booklets and guides on living well with diabetes. So if there's something you want more advice on, give our helpline a call on **0345 123 2399** or ask a family member or friend to do so, and we can send information out to you.

## Common symptoms of diabetes

- feeling constantly thirsty and wanting to go to the toilet more
- blurred vision
- losing weight without meaning to and feeling more hungry than normal
- cuts taking longer to heal
- genital itching or thrush

## Putting type 2 diabetes into remission

There isn't a cure yet for diabetes. But some people with type 2 diabetes who are living with being overweight or having obesity can put their diabetes into remission. That means their average blood sugar levels for the last three months, taken from a single blood test called an HbA1c, is lower than 48mmol/mol (6.5%) for six months and they no longer need to take any medication for diabetes.

Weight loss has many benefits, even if it doesn't lead to remission.

If you'd like to work towards putting your diabetes into remission, speak to your healthcare team for advice on losing weight.

### More info

Different types of diabetes  
**[diabetes.org.uk/diabetes-the-basics/other-types-of-diabetes](https://diabetes.org.uk/diabetes-the-basics/other-types-of-diabetes)**  
Diabetes symptoms  
**[diabetes.org.uk/symptoms](https://diabetes.org.uk/symptoms)**

“

**We know that losing even 5% of your weight helps improve HbA1c, blood pressure levels and cholesterol. This can have a big impact on your overall health and how you feel.**

”

Douglas Twenefour,  
Diabetes UK Deputy Head of Care

# Taking diabetes medication when you're in prison

**You may not be prescribed the same insulin or other diabetes medication you're used to when you're in prison. But you'll get one very similar that's allowed under prison guidelines.**

You have the right to be given the correct type and dosage of insulin or other diabetes medication at the right time. You may need to queue up at the medicine hatch for this or a healthcare professional will come to your cell to administer it.

## Insulin in-possession

Some prisoners may do their own insulin injections or take their diabetes medication without supervision from a healthcare professional. This is known as insulin in-possession or medicine in-possession. You keep your medication with you.

If you want to be able to take your medication unsupervised and this hasn't been mentioned, speak to your healthcare team. They'll have a chat with you and weigh up the risk of letting you do this and decide if it's something they think you'd be able to do within that particular prison setting.

If they decide to let you take your medication without supervision, you'll sign a form agreeing to follow the rules they set out for doing so. The agreement will be for a set length of time and will be regularly reviewed to check if it's still possible for you to look after your own medication.

Every prison has rules on when an individual doesn't have the option to have medicine in-possession. This may depend on things like the category of prisoner or prison.

## If you're not ready to do your own insulin injections

Sometimes your healthcare team may think you're ready to do your insulin injections unsupervised. Doing them yourself can be a big step. So don't feel pressured into doing your own injections until you feel confident you know what you're doing. Start off by trying to do them yourself while a member of the healthcare team is there.

# Diabetes care you should get in prison – and making complaints

**You should get the same NHS checks and level of NHS care for your diabetes as you would outside prison. See page 9. It doesn't matter if you're in a state-run prison or a privately-run prison.**

And you have the right to be seen by qualified doctors, nurses and given appointments to see other diabetes experts like podiatrists (footcare specialists) if you need them.

Some prisons have permanent medical facilities with inpatient beds. Other prisons may have visiting healthcare staff and you may attend a mobile unit. Or you may be accompanied to medical appointments outside the prison. Or a combination.

## How to complain about your healthcare

If you aren't getting the diabetes care you need or are unhappy with any part of your diabetes care or treatment, have a chat with your healthcare team. There's a good chance it can be sorted out quickly.

If it isn't sorted out, put your complaint to your healthcare team in writing. Include:

- details of the matter you're complaining about
- the names of any staff involved
- action you want taken, for example, an apology, change of system or an explanation.

Your healthcare team must then follow the rules for their complaints procedure and will need to respond to you. They should include details of what you can do next if you're not happy with their response.

They should have posters or leaflets about their complaints procedure where you have your appointments. Healthcare complaints in state-run prisons follow the NHS complaints procedure but healthcare providers in private prisons have their own procedure. See [Getting help to make complaints](#) on page 11.



# Health checks and support you should get for your diabetes

**Your diabetes care in prison should include the following checks and support. This will help your healthcare team spot and treat any new long-term health problems caused by your diabetes.**

Every year at least you should have:

- An HbA1c blood test.  
It shows your blood sugar levels for the past three months.
- Your blood pressure measured.
- Your blood fats, such as cholesterol, measured.
- Your feet and legs checked: skin, blood supply and nerve supply.
- A blood test and a urine test to check your kidney function.
- Dietary advice offered to you from a healthcare professional expert in nutrition.
- The flu vaccine.
- If you smoke, you should get help to stop.

At least every two years your eyesight should be screened to pick up signs of any sight loss.

# Why and how to report problems getting your insulin

**Informal feedback we have collected from prisoners with diabetes and their families, suggests getting insulin, getting it on time and getting the right type and dosage of insulin can sometimes be a problem.**

It's important that you get the right type and dose of insulin at the right time. This will help to keep your blood sugars stable.

If you treat your diabetes with insulin and miss doses your body can have a severe lack of insulin. This can lead to a serious condition called diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA) which is likely to need hospital treatment. This can affect people with type 1 diabetes and some people with type 2 diabetes.

Some people with type 2 diabetes can also develop a serious condition caused by high blood sugar called Hypersomolar Hyperglycaemic State (HHS).

## More info

DKA

**[diabetes.org.uk/dka](https://diabetes.org.uk/dka)**

HHS

**[diabetes.org.uk/hhs](https://diabetes.org.uk/hhs)**

## What to do if you don't get your insulin

If you've missed an insulin dose and it is affecting your blood sugars, speak to a prison officer and ask them if you can speak to a healthcare professional.

If you don't get your insulin at the right time more than a couple of times, speak to your healthcare team about the problems you're having. They should suggest something to stop it happening next time. But if they don't, put your complaint in writing, see page 8.

If you feel confident about doing insulin injections yourself, speak to your healthcare team about this, see page 7. If you have type 1 diabetes, and it's of interest to you, you may be entitled to a free insulin pump, which means you won't need insulin injections, see pages 16 and 17.

## Getting help to make complaints

Ask a member of your family or a friend to help you. Or ask a prison officer if you can speak to a member of the Independent Monitoring Board, or if you're in Scotland ask to speak to an Independent Prison Monitor. They will be able to help you with your complaint. They are unpaid and independent of prison authorities. Your family can also contact them for help.

## More info

Independent Monitoring Board  
(England and Wales)

**[imb.org.uk/contact-us/](https://imb.org.uk/contact-us/)**

Independent Monitoring Board  
(Northern Ireland)

**[imb-ni.org.uk/](https://imb-ni.org.uk/)**

Monitoring (Scotland) Her Majesty's  
Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland

**[prisonsinspectoratescotland.gov.uk/monitoring](https://prisonsinspectoratescotland.gov.uk/monitoring)**

# Tips for making healthier food choices

**Although you have less say on what you can eat in prison, make the most of your menu choices using our tips.**

If you have diabetes, eating well helps keep blood sugar levels healthy and can protect your long-term health. And whatever type of diabetes you have, it can help you lose weight if you need to.

- ✓ Have smaller portions.
- ✓ Instead of white bread, pasta and rice, pick brown.
- ✓ Pick chicken, turkey, fish, or eggs rather than red meat like bacon, sausages and ham.
- ✓ Eat oily fish like salmon and mackerel twice a week if you can.
- ✓ Pick grilled, steamed or baked foods rather than fried.
- ✓ Don't add salt to your food or sugar to your drinks. Sweeteners are fine.
- ✓ Eat plenty of vegetables.
- ✓ Have fewer treats like biscuits, chocolate, puddings and crisps. Replace them with fruit and yoghurt.

If there aren't enough healthy options on the menu, you can ask your healthcare team to speak to the prison catering team.





## Hypo packs

If you have hypos – low blood sugar – it's reasonable to ask your healthcare team to provide glucose tablets or other sweet things to help treat them. Or they should be able to ask the catering team to provide them. This means you won't have to buy them yourself or keep food back from meals.

## Carb counting







If you have type 1 diabetes, you may still be able to count carbs in prison to help you manage your blood sugar levels. You'll either be on an insulin pump or at least four insulin injections a day and have attended a carb counting course for this to be possible. Ask your healthcare team if you can have a smart glucose meter to help you do this. And ask your healthcare team or friends or family to download and print our free Carbs Count e-book to help.

**[shop.diabetes.org.uk/products/carbs-count-e-book](https://shop.diabetes.org.uk/products/carbs-count-e-book)**

# Tips to become more active

## Doing more physical activity is good for diabetes and has been shown to lower anxiety and depression in prisoners.

Whether you feel able to do some on-the-spot-walking or running, it all makes a difference. Use our tips to help you. They are based on government guidelines.

-  Simply move more and spend less time sitting down.
-  Break activity into bouts of 10 minutes or more.
-  Aim to do 20 minutes physical activity every day or 30 minutes five days a week.
-  If you're not sure what to do, try walking fast on the spot.
-  Pick physical work or training such as gardening or woodwork.
-  Try to do activity that strengthens your muscles two days a week like using body resistance and doing things like push ups or sit ups.

### Get advice before starting a new activity

If you take medication for your diabetes or have mobility issues because of health issues, check with your healthcare team before trying a new type of activity.

Exercise is good for you but it can raise or lower your blood sugar levels and increase your risk of low blood sugar – hypos.

Testing your blood sugar before and after activity, adjusting your insulin dose or eating before or after exercise are all things they may need to advise you on.



Photo: Andrew "Donovan" Valdivia, Unsplash.com



# Asking about diabetes tech to help keep an eye on blood sugar levels



**Even if you're doing all the right things, it can be hard for some prisoners to keep their blood sugar levels within a range agreed with their healthcare team.**

Blood sugar levels can be affected by everything from stress caused by the ups and downs of prison life to medication you take for another medical condition.

It's important to regularly check your blood sugar levels to help you spot and treat low blood sugar or hypos and high blood sugar or hyperts.

**Electronic devices can help you keep your blood sugar in range.**

They're attached to the body but can be taken off for things like showering.

Speak to your healthcare team if you're interested. They will know if you're entitled to a free glucose monitor or insulin pump under NHS rules.



## **Continuous glucose monitor (CGM) or a flash glucose monitor**

A glucose monitor can be useful if you have lots of hypos or are worried about them or don't get hypo symptoms.

A small sensor on your arm sends and records your blood sugar readings night and day to a device like a small mobile phone.

You can check the device at any time to see what your blood sugar levels are doing.

A CGM will also sound an alarm if your blood sugar is going too low or too high.

### **Benefits**

It's easier to spot or prevent hypos. You can track your blood sugar levels and spot trends in what makes it go up or down.

## **Insulin pump**

An insulin pump attaches to your stomach and gives your body the insulin it needs night and day. This can help reduce hypos. And you won't need to do insulin injections. You can also use it with a CGM.

You'll need to use the pump without help once your healthcare team have shown you what to do. Pumps are not an 'easy fix' and will take time and effort to get used to. And you will need to be able to work out your insulin doses and count carbs for a pump to work well. For more information see page 13.

# Help with diabetes before you're released from prison

**Before you leave prison, your prison healthcare team will talk to you about how to look after your diabetes once you're released.**

They should help you register with a new GP and book any appointments you'll need.

You should be given enough diabetes medication to last you until you can get to see a GP – at least seven days' worth. Or an FP10 prescription which lets you pick up medication from a pharmacy for free.

You should also get a copy of your care plan. This lists all health and social issues that affected you while you were in prison.



# Get more support and information from Diabetes UK

**After reading our guide, if you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact our helpline.**

## Helpline

If you live in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, call 0345 123 2399.

If you live in Scotland, call 0141 212 8710.

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm.

Chat to others online in our support forum **[diabetes.org.uk/forum](https://diabetes.org.uk/forum)**

## How we can help

We're here to provide information, advice and support to people with all types of diabetes and their friends and families so they can learn to live well with diabetes.

Use our website **[diabetes.org.uk](https://diabetes.org.uk)** or we can send out free booklets about living with diabetes.

Prisoners can write to us with questions or for information at: Diabetes UK, Well Lawrence House, 126 Back Church Lane, London E1 1FH.

## Main sources for guide

Physical health of people in prison. NICE guidelines 57 **[nice.org.uk/guidance/ng57](https://nice.org.uk/guidance/ng57)**

GOV.UK Healthcare in prison **[gov.uk/life-in-prison/healthcare-in-prison](https://gov.uk/life-in-prison/healthcare-in-prison)**

Diabetes UK website **[diabetes.org.uk](https://diabetes.org.uk)**

Thank you to all the prisoners who helped us by giving their feedback on the previous version of this guide. And thank you to Diabetes Consultant Nurse Lesley Mills for her insights on prison healthcare.

# GET IN TOUCH

Call **0345 123 2399**

Email **[info@diabetes.org.uk](mailto:info@diabetes.org.uk)**

Visit **[diabetes.org.uk](https://diabetes.org.uk)**

Search **Diabetes UK** on Facebook,  
Twitter, YouTube and Instagram



We welcome your feedback. If any information in this guide has been particularly helpful or if you would like to suggest any improvements, please send your comments to: **[helpline@diabetes.org.uk](mailto:helpline@diabetes.org.uk)** or write to us at: Diabetes UK Helpline, Wells Lawrence House, 126 Back Church Lane, London E1 1FH

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Our information is correct at the time of publication. It's not a substitute for seeing a healthcare professional, and isn't intended to replace the advice given by your diabetes healthcare team.

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