

# DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT INSULIN

by Dr Ng Jen Min, Ben, consultant endocrinologist, Changi General Hospital

The treatment of diabetes and insulin treatment has evolved by leaps and bounds since its discovery in the 1920s. Now, there are numerous different insulin therapies available in varying forms and methods of action.

Despite the fact that insulin has been used in many people with diabetes since its discovery, significant barriers and fear towards this treatment remain.

A recent study in Singapore shows that the majority of people with diabetes are opposed to or have significant reservations about insulin treatment.

Part of the problem lies in common misconceptions which ultimately lead to fear of insulin therapy. Here are some common 'myths' that I often come across in my clinical practice.



1

## 'I need insulin because I have failed.'

Just as the body ages, diabetes will progress as well. This does not mean that your diabetes has become more 'serious' but that you may need stronger medications to control your blood sugar. Diabetes is only 'serious' if you develop complications when the sugar levels are not well controlled.

I'm afraid at times some of the public including healthcare professionals are equally to blame for instilling this feeling of failure. In order to urge or warn people to manage their diabetes better, insulin treatment is often referred to as a 'punishment' for 'bad lifestyle choices'.

All too often we hear doomsday statements not dissimilar to 'If you don't start exercising or eating better, you are going to need insulin...'

All this puts insulin in a very poor light; but let's be clear that moving on to insulin treatment is not necessarily a sign of failure on a diabetic's part but it should be seen as a natural progression of diabetes.

2

## 'Insulin causes the kidney and eyes to fail.'

This is one of the most common misconceptions and very unfortunate. Insulin has been blamed for contributing to organ failure. While people with diabetes can develop complications, this is inevitably a result of high blood sugars. Many people who do not want to be on insulin have very high blood sugars which have been left untreated for years.

Once complications develop, due to a variety of factors (pressure from healthcare providers, family or the individual) many people start insulin with the hope that it will improve their blood sugars and their complications. However, starting blood sugar reducing treatments too late often does not work as organ damage has already occurred and insulin cannot reverse the complications.

As a result of this delay, some people find that their diabetic complication(s) appear to have started not long after their insulin treatment began. The truth of the matter is that they probably started their insulin treatments too late and were therefore unsuccessful in preventing or reversing the diabetic complication.

**Modern insulin regimes have actually become very simple now. Many insulin devices come in pen devices where delivery and storage are pretty straightforward.**

3

## 'Insulin is dangerous.'

Just like many other different forms of medications and treatments, insulin can be dangerous if given incorrectly. However, part of the reason why it can be dangerous is simply because it is a very powerful blood sugar reducing agent.

If given too much, a person can develop hypoglycaemia (a situation where the sugars fall too low).

It is important that you and your family familiarise yourselves with the way your insulin works and also to recognise signs and symptoms of hypoglycaemia and the steps you can take to avert such an event.

4

## 'Insulin is hard to take. It is complicated.'

Modern insulin regimes have actually become very simple now. Most doctors will start patients on one injection of insulin a day making it easier than many other oral medications for diabetes.

Many insulin devices come in pen devices where delivery and storage are pretty straightforward. Many people in the beginning are daunted by the thought of insulin and injectable treatments but the reality is almost all of them learn to cope well.



5

**The most important step in the treatment of diabetes is the individualisation of treatment. With the numerous types of medicines available for diabetes today, it is essential that the treatment of blood sugars is tailored to the individual patient.**

**'It is better to take tablets than go on insulin.'**

**T**he most important step in the treatment of diabetes is the individualisation of treatment. Each person is different. With the numerous types of medicines available for diabetes today, it is essential that the treatment of blood sugars is tailored to the individual patient.

It is therefore important to speak with your healthcare providers if insulin treatment (or any treatment for that matter) is contemplated.

Some people may do better on tablet treatment, but an equal number of people who will also benefit from insulin treatment.

6

**'I am all alone.'**

**Y**ou are not alone. People with diabetes commonly need insulin treatment and there are many people in Singapore on insulin treatment. People with diabetes now live very long and fruitful lives and, because of that, as the disease progresses many of them will eventually need insulin.

This becomes more and more common the longer you have diabetes. If you are looking for support, do contact the Diabetic Society of Singapore to join their support group activities.

Insulin treatment is a powerful treatment for diabetes. While it is true that not everyone will benefit from insulin treatment, insulin is still effective and commonly used to treat diabetes. Embarking on insulin treatment does require motivation and education and it is encouraging to know that most people cope with the treatment well.

Finally, it is essential that all therapy in any illness is tailored to the needs of the individual patient. No one is the same and it important that patients and healthcare providers work closely together to find the best and most effective treatment to suit the patient.

