

MAKING THE CAMP DECISION

Camping for all children is a time for fun, developing new skills, maturing in group social skills, and a chance to be independent from the family. And for campers with diabetes, it's an opportunity to manage their diabetes using their own problem-solving skills and self-discipline.

For kids with diabetes, it's important that the first camping experience take place in a controlled and safe environment, where all the diabetes management requirements are factored into the camp day and where a specialized diabetes team of health professionals stands ready to lend support to the camper. Members of this team help children who attend diabetes camps in decision-making and practicing the skills they need, like how to do injections, what dose of insulin they need, and what to do about hypoglycemia. Most of these camps are run by the state affiliates of the American Diabetes Association, and they provide a tremendous service for kids and families.

But there are also other camping opportunities like scout or sports camps and Outward Bound experiences that your child might like to take part in. When is your child ready to go to these "other" camps? What information do you need before you decide? And what diabetes information do you need to tell the counselor and other personnel?

IS YOUR CHILD READY?

If your child wants to attend one of these other camps, two criteria need to be met; (1) the child has had a successful experience at a diabetes camp; and (2) the child has demonstrated to you that he or she is capable of taking complete responsibility for managing diabetes. Perhaps that doesn't mean it's always done perfectly at home, but you're confident that your child understands that at camp, the environment and schedule change, making diabetes harder to manage. Camp won't be a problem if your child is willing to do what it takes to stay safe in difficult-to-manage times. That means:

- Doing more blood glucose testing
- Being alert to low blood glucose readings
- Carrying emergency rations at all times
- Finding a buddy who can be taught the necessary precautions and emergency treatment

ARE YOU READY?

As a parent, asking the following questions will help you decide whether the camp offers a safe environment for your child:

- Is medical staff available? The camp should have at least one medical person in residence.
- Does the medical staff know anything about diabetes?
- Do they know what emergency measures to take for a diabetic crisis?
- Do they know about glucagon? Glucagon won't cause lasting problems if given too soon or without need. It can be a real lifesaver!

- Do they know how to test blood glucose levels? Someone at the camp needs to be able to do this if an emergency arises. (It's helpful to send along a recipe-sized box with your child's name on it and the fact that he or she has diabetes; inside, list your child's medications, including insulin, and all other important medical information. Work out a schedule for the medical staff to follow. Attach a glucagon emergency kit with instructions.)
- Is there a hospital nearby?
- Can the hospital staff handle emergencies?
- What is the schedule for meals and activities?
- Will meals always be served at scheduled times and will snacks be readily available? That is, can the camper have access to food about every three hours?
- Is there adequate mature supervision of the campers?
- Will the camp provide you with the names of the counselors?

IS THE CAMP READY?

If you are not satisfied with the answers to these questions, it's a good idea to choose another camp. Once you're confident about all the information you have received, what do you tell the counselor? **TELL THE COUNSELOR YOUR CHILD HAS DIABETES.** This is essential to your child's safety. Also describe any disabilities your child has.

The hardest decision to make is what else to tell the counselor without intruding in your child's life or mistrusting his ability to speak for himself. The counselor probably needs to know: (1) the child will need to test blood sugar and perhaps urine for ketones (discuss with your camper how humidity and heat affect testing and blood glucose results); (2) which medications your child takes, especially the timing of insulin injections; (3) how important it is to maintain regular scheduling and to have access to food; (4) what to do if meals are late; (5) what low blood glucose is, the usual signs of your child's reaction to low blood glucose, and how to treat it; and (6) what to do if your child is sick or hurt. You don't have to prepare the counselor for a medical degree in diabetes, but do prepare him or her for emergencies.

If your child has recently had some type of psychological trauma such as death or divorce in the family, it might be helpful to let someone in authority at camp know about it. Whether to disclose this information depends on the child's age and personality and the maturity of the counselor.

We are entrusting our most precious assets to others when we choose a camp. That's why it is so important to find out everything you can about the camp and, in turn, to give the camp personnel all the right information.

No one ever went into the youth camping business to become rich. Likely the camp was created and is managed by mature adults who really care about young people. When they accept children with diabetes as campers that caring must extend to a willingness to learn at least the basics of emergency care and to provide the structured environment needed to make certain the children are safe.

And once you've finished with all the planning and your child is off having a great time at camp, have a wonderful vacation yourself! (Be sure to let the camp personnel know a phone number where you can be reached and your child's doctor's phone number.)

[Adapted from: International Diabetes Center, Spring 1991. Living Well With Diabetes. p.28-29.]