

Are You Worried about Starting to Take Insulin?

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Many people with type 2 diabetes dread the idea of taking insulin. I often hear people say they “hate shots”, but I suspected that the reasons people resist taking insulin go far beyond a fear of injections. In the last few years I have conducted research studies to help me better understand how many people resist taking insulin, the reasons for this resistance, and how to overcome it.

Insulin myths

One of these research studies is called the Diabetes Attitudes, Wishes, and Needs (DAWN) study, and it involved a survey of over 5,000 people with diabetes from 13 countries around the world, including the US. Almost 2,000 of the patients in the survey were not yet taking insulin, and their attitudes about insulin were striking.

Taking insulin means I've failed. Almost half of DAWN respondents (48%) felt that having to take insulin meant that they had failed to follow their treatment recommendations. Feeling that starting insulin is a sign of failure was more common in the US than in any other country in the study. Warnings from physicians that starting insulin will be the consequence for not adhering to treatment recommendations probably contribute to this fear. But when you have type 2 diabetes you almost always produce less and less insulin over time. Studies show that the average person newly diagnosed with diabetes is producing only about half the normal amount of insulin, and that within six years that number is down to one-quarter of normal production. So if you have type 2 diabetes you could be doing almost everything right when it comes to your treatment and still need insulin to control your blood glucose; in this case it's not you who has failed, it's your pancreas.

Insulin won't help me manage my diabetes. A second key DAWN finding illustrates another common insulin myth: only 23% of those surveyed thought that taking insulin would help them manage their diabetes. But insulin is actually very effective in lowering blood glucose levels, and that can improve how you feel day-to-day, and help you stay healthy in the future. In fact, the American Diabetes Association recommends early addition of insulin to the treatment regimen of people with type 2 diabetes whose A1C levels are higher than the recommended value (less than 7.0%).

Finding ways to make taking insulin easier

Understanding the progressive nature of type 2 diabetes and the real benefits of insulin can help lower resistance to taking insulin, and finding better ways to deliver insulin can help as well. In the US most people take insulin using a vial and syringe, but in most of the rest of the world insulin pens are much more popular because they are perceived as being more convenient and making better self-care possible.

I was interested in finding out why people in the US are less likely to use pens. So my colleague Mark Peyrot and I surveyed about 900 people in the US who had type 2 diabetes and had heard of insulin pens: those using pens, those using syringes, and those not yet taking insulin. We found that people in all 3 groups rated pens higher than syringes on effectiveness in controlling blood glucose, effectiveness in facilitating overall diabetes self-care, and convenience. One interesting finding: people not yet taking insulin were the group most likely to rate pens higher than syringes, and almost everyone in this group (97.5%) said they would find it easier to start taking insulin with a pen than with a vial and syringe; almost two-thirds of this group (61.5%) said they would *definitely* find it easier to start with a pen, with the rest saying they would *probably* find it easier.

Among the study respondents who were already taking insulin, those using pens were more satisfied with their insulin delivery system than those using syringes. In fact, a large majority of both pen and syringe users said they would prefer using a pen (93% of pen users and 72% of syringe users).

Our major discovery was that the most powerful influence on whether a person used a pen was having the physician recommend pen use. Even having the physician offer the pen as an option for taking insulin strongly influenced the decision to use a pen. Although almost no physicians discouraged pen use, the majority of syringe users said their physicians never mentioned pens when discussing taking insulin.

If insulin is in your future

If insulin is in your future because your health care provider has discussed it with you or because other medicines have not enabled you to control your blood glucose, here are some important things to keep in mind:

- Starting insulin is not a sign you have failed. No one is perfect when it comes to diabetes self-care, but even if you are close to perfect, the fact your body makes less and less insulin over time means you will probably need insulin at some point to control your blood glucose.
- Insulin is recognized as the most effective medicine for controlling blood glucose. And better glucose control has important immediate benefits, like more energy, clearer thinking, and better emotional wellbeing, as well as long-term benefits, like reduced risk for diabetes complications and a longer, healthier life.
- Research shows that once people start taking insulin they find that many of their concerns were overblown.
- Taking insulin with a pen can be more convenient and effective than using a vial and syringe. According to our research, pens can also make it easier to start taking insulin. Talk to your physician to see if a pen might be the right choice for you.