

Traveling With The Silent Killer

By Bob Merritt

Diabetes doesn't care if you have fun or not. If you don't have the right diet—it could care less. Slip up and it will take advantage.

We have logged over 11,000 miles since March and that takes in a lot of campsites. It is very rare to meet a couple that one, or both, hasn't got something wrong with them. Some have beaten cancer while others are trying to make the most out of whatever time they have left. Heart problems rank high, but the biggest culprit seems to be diabetes.

For those that have this disease, and it is a disease, everyday is subject to change. We are thankful for the good days when our blood sugar readings are good. We wonder what went wrong when the readings are too high or too low. There is a wealth of knowledge among campers. Some can help, but some can hurt. A diabetic is an independent individual. What I mean by independent goes hand in hand with dependant. As an individual they have to realize their body is different from anyone else, even other diabetics. The medication we use and the food we eat can differ among diabetics. In April I was taking four Glucophage a day, plus one Actose and a multitude of vitamins. All this went along with 30cc of insulin twice a day. Find yourself a good doctor. If you have concerns, look until you find one you trust and listen to what he tells you.

For eight years I had not been on insulin. During that time I didn't take care of myself and I admit it. Eating right seemed out of the question, but looking back it would have been easier. I had no self-discipline and didn't start paying attention until about a year ago. Many of you will remember when I got burned in September of last year. Dr. Al Parker of Dahlonga was worried about my healing capabilities. As he looked into the slits in my swollen face (which resembled a piece of extra crispy fried chicken), he said, "Diabetics usually don't heal well and I am putting you on insulin." I heard this with fear because I had never liked the idea of sticking a needle in myself. Until my hands healed good enough to give myself shots, Linda did the honors. For the good insulin did me, I wish I had been on it years ago. I got over being afraid of the needle and have accepted full responsibility for giving myself the shots and checking my blood sugar. I still wonder how blood sugar readings can fluctuate so much and for no apparent reason.

At the time we left home in April, I had a big problem. I was heavy. Almost overnight I gained from 155 to 195 pounds. My body suddenly took on so much water and I was swollen up like a balloon. I knew what a lot of women go through with swollen ankles, legs, arms and face. I went from a size 34 pants to a size 44, and in a hurry. This was cause for concern to my heart and lungs. This extra weight wouldn't go away no matter what medication the doctor gave me. The trips to the bathroom varied from every thirty minutes to every hour—day and night. Hooking up the trailer was uncomfortable, setting it up was uncomfortable and breaking camp was uncomfortable.

As I sat on the side of the bed looking at my thighs, calves, ankles and feet, I wondered if I would ever see my blood vessels again. My thighs and calves looked like a fullbacks and moving was painful. As we sat in our second campsite Linda said, "You know what? My diet just might help you." I said, "Honey, eating isn't my problem, it's this blasted water." "It won't hurt to try it," she prodded. To make a long story short, I went on a low carb diet and in a months time had lost 20 pounds. I had blood vessels again! Being on a good diet gave me my life back. I must admit I get off the diet from time to time. I sure do miss my country-fried or creamed potatoes, gravy and dumplings. Other than a piece of birthday cake every now and then, I do really well.

Everything ties into diabetes. There are things you can do when on the road to control how you feel and protect your body. Check your blood sugar often. Three times a day will give you a good idea how your lifestyle is reacting. With time on your hands, now is a good time to get in tune with your body. What you find out may surprise you. While you want to live, there is a plot going on in your body to kill you. They don't call diabetes "the silent killer" for nothing. Just when you

think you have it under control, something unexplained happens and your readings are too high or dangerously low. Make no mistake about it; you are in a battle for your life—the rest of your life. In order to win now and then you have to be on your toes all the time. Your lifestyle has to be changed and guarded when it comes to food, drink and exercise. Those tidbits you munch on through the day may have to go. Just indulging in one pastry or package of chips can send your sugar through the roof. Avoiding proper meals at the right times can bring your sugar so low you could be just a step from a diabetic coma. Keeping a regular Coke or orange juice in the refrigerator is good for sudden low sugar attacks. A piece of candy in the glove compartment or pocket may also come in handy once low blood sugar occurs. I never leave our trailer without water or Diet Coke and a package of peanut butter crackers. I have learned the signs of a low sugar attack and respond by devouring the crackers. Low sugar can sneak upon you unexpectedly. Just because you ate a good meal, it's no insurance that an attack won't suddenly hit. Too much exercise (or work), late meals, missed medication and illness can bring on a low sugar attack and mess up a good day or night.

At a time when life should be relaxing and carefree, you have to be on guard constantly. If you are the one with diabetes, your mate should be made aware of your readings. They need to know what to do if you suddenly exhibit signs of low sugar. They are actually the best hope you have for a more normal life. A diabetic is his, or her, worst enemy. They are the one that has to do the adjusting in eating, drinking and self-control. If your spouse is the one with diabetes, you are their hope. Men are babies, but often too proud to admit what is happening to them. Some women don't want to worry their husband and often suffer in silence while trying to handle it alone. Both have to remember how much they love the other and help.

We found a number of things to be easier on the road. The diabetic diet is a good one for most people so Linda stays on it with me. Her dad was a diabetic and she saw him lose some toes due to bad circulation. She doesn't want me to go through that.

Once I got serious about diabetes, I got mad at myself. My own body was trying to destroy me and that made me mad. I arose to its challenge and really paid attention to what was happening to me. I would wake up in the night and the illuminated clock was just one big blur of light. I knew my sugar was low, but how low? I anxiously took my reading and headed for the refrigerator. After drinking some juice or Coke, I could see better and could tell my sugar was coming up. All this became a game and for each reaction, I had a reaction. Letting your guard down is only inviting disaster.

Before we left on our trip we discussed it all with Dr. Parker. Realizing how determined we were, he gave us good advice to use while we were traveling. We use Eckerd Drugstore when we are home, but they were not in all the areas we were going. Dr. Parker told us the drugstores across the country could communicate via the computers and I should never run out of my medication. We utilized Wal-Mart quite a bit because there was always one of their stores in the towns we went through. Sometimes they would have to call the doctor and there was a delay. We made sure to get the medication replenished before I got too low. Dr. Parker also gave us a print out of my medical history in case something happened while we were on the road. He listed everything that I had been treated for in the past few years, all my medications and shots I had received. He included records from my blood work and any allergies. It was very thorough. I also had to visit a clinic periodically and have tests run. There were no emergencies, but if there had been one, this information would have saved a lot of time and money.

The temptation to "pig out just once" comes up occasionally, especially when visiting friends or relatives. A true test of your control is to order only what is on the menu that is in your best interest. I found that taking my insulin thirty minutes before a meal didn't always guarantee I would be eating in that period of time. I learned that by telling the waiter about your predicament they would rush out my salad or something to tide me over until our meal was served.

It is easier to control my diabetes while on the road than at home. Time is on my side since I am in a new environment consisting of idle time. No hurry, no bothers and no worries. I can concentrate on fun and controlling that which keeps me from enjoying life. We only keep the food in our travel trailer that is on our diet. No junk food is allowed since I don't have a lot of self-

control. When we are home, I'm always busy. Our five acres keeps us busy and time slips away. I often eat lunch late and pay the price. Sometimes my sugar is high, sometimes low.

Why bother? If it is such a struggle, why not give in? Consider the alternatives—death, blindness or a coma. These are the extremes, but they are true. There are also the things that can happen because of bad circulation and incorrect medication. The battle rages. The best chance we have for winning is a good life for ourselves and our faithful, all caring travel companion. Life is a trip, enjoy it.

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