



Diabetes Self-Management:
A Guide to Encouraging Your Patients to Speak about
their Injections

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An Unaddressed Problem

Even though insulin therapy is recognized as the optimum therapy for intensive blood glucose management, some people who are receiving insulin therapy experience anxiety about injections. For some this anxiety is minor, for other patients it can be significant. Regardless of the degree of burden, it is important that these psychosocial issues are addressed.

These concerns are often inaccurately referred to as “needle phobic.” In some cases, patients have become resigned to accepting any pain, bruising or quality of life issues, as a necessary part of having diabetes and not worth mentioning during follow-up appointments with their physician. This patient may decide to “manage” the situation with behaviors that lead to poor diabetes control (i.e., skip injections, inappropriately adjust their meal program).

As a healthcare provider you may think any fears, anxiety or frustrations associated with injections are an unavoidable aspect of care. While you are well aware and sympathetic to your patients concerns, when it comes to addressing the psychosocial aspects of diabetes during your patient’s appointments, you want to spend the little time you have discussing lab results, medication or insulin dose adjustments.

This guide will address communication barriers with patients and offer tips and suggestions on how to encourage your patients to speak about quality of life concerns.

The Injection Impact Report

The American Association of Diabetes Educators recently conducted a survey of 500 patients and 300 physicians and diabetes educators that examined compliance issues relating to daily insulin injections and the importance of communication between people with diabetes and their healthcare providers.

By examining patients' concerns regarding their diabetes care/injections and evaluating healthcare providers' perception of patient self-management, the survey suggests that some patients are not opening up to their diabetes educators or physicians about their injections. In the survey, 37 percent of respondents felt that discussing quality of life issues would be a bother to their healthcare provider.

Of the 300 healthcare providers surveyed, only 12 percent have had patients address their quality of life concerns relating to insulin injections either often (one percent) or sometimes (11 percent). Forty percent of physicians and diabetes educators surveyed have initiated a dialogue with their patients on quality of life issues related to insulin injection. However, only 21 percent of their patients report their healthcare professional asks them about the impact of needle sticks sometimes or often.

Addressing Injection Concerns

As the Injection Impact Reports results indicate, patient and physician views regarding injections can be quite different. But, how can healthcare providers use this information to improve patient care?

The first step may be as simple as taking the time to ask your patients about their quality of life as it relates to injections. This might be all that is necessary to encourage them to open up about their concerns regarding injections and bridge that gap in communication. Simply starting a dialogue can be a crucial step in improving overall care and ultimately outcomes.

In the Injection Impact Report, many patients expressed not wanting to bother their healthcare provider with questions about their self-management issues. Therefore, even if you are asking them about how their injections are going, they may not be answering honestly. Letting your patients know that quality of life issues are common with injections may encourage them to speak up more.

Additionally, patients may not plan what they are going to discuss with their healthcare providers in advance of their appointments. Whether it just didn't occur to them or they simply did not have the time, it may be rare for a patient to proactively address their emotions or issues surrounding injections.

But as a healthcare provider, you are very aware of the critical role patients play in their own health and well-being. Encourage your patients to prepare a list of questions or concerns they may have ready for their next appointment or provide a form to complete in the waiting area and then use this form as the agenda for the visit. When patients raise their concerns, give them resources where they can find answers to their questions and if you are a physician, refer them to a diabetes educator for more detailed discussions about their diabetes management plan.

Helping your patient feel positive and empowered in managing their diabetes is very important. Patients often feel that injection therapy is a sign of failure.^{1A} They see insulin as a last resort and if they need to initiate therapy it means they failed to take care of themselves with other treatment options. This negative attitude can carry throughout injection therapy and can significantly impact their compliance and diabetes management in general. The negative feeling about insulin can further impact quality of life concerns surrounding administering injections.

Encourage Patients to Keep a Diary

If your patient appears hesitant when you first initiate a conversation about injections, encourage them to keep a diary for two weeks and share it with you. This will give you a true sense of how their diabetes self-management is working. Encourage them to highlight any concerns they may have throughout that week. The diary could include:

- A description of each meal with time of day included, noting skipped meals
- A description of length and type of exercise
- A description of each injection, any issues surrounding the injection and the time of day of the injection
- Social situations in which taking the injection had an impact
- Family and friends perspective on the impact of the injections
- A description of health-related issues and stress that may impact diabetes control.
- A list of medications taken other than insulin.

A major concern for most patients is that they will have to increase the number of injections they administer. Encouraging them to keep a diary will help them better understand their blood glucose levels and how their self-management behaviors influence their results. It will also give you the information you need to determine the appropriate solution, whether it is a tool or device that is designed to help lessen the burden or pain, or if it's simply a matter of educating them on the importance of insulin and how to fit it into their lifestyle.

Adopt Best Practices^{1C}

Developing a practice-based approach for improving diabetes care with your patients can also help. If you know of other practices that have programs in place to aid patients in their diabetes self-management, consider modeling yours similarly. Some suggestions include:

- Patient support groups that allow people taking insulin injections to discuss quality of life and offer suggestions to each other^{1C}
- If you are a physician, identify a local resource; find a diabetes educator for your patients to engage in their diabetes support efforts.
- Encourage family and friends involvement in diabetes self-management by holding talks/meetings with family members and/or friends about diabetes injections and diabetes care.
- Utilize your practice web site and create a page for diabetes self-care
- Provide educational materials for diabetes patients in the waiting room and/or exam rooms.
- Recommend educational resources to patients, including a referral to a diabetes educator if you are a physician for individual consultation.

Recognizing the Impact of Injections on Patients

The Injection Impact Report demonstrates there is some concern surrounding communication between patients and their healthcare providers. If you are a physician and your patient needs additional injection counseling, refer them to a diabetes educator who can guide them in greater detail on how to manage their injections.

As you know, patients need continued support and counseling to help them maintain effective self-management. Addressing quality of life issues with your patients can help improve both communication and outcomes with injection therapy, resulting in decreased frustration for you and your patients.

For more information on the newly released Injection Impact Report, visit www.InjectionImpact.com.

¹ Funnell, M. Overcoming Barriers to the Initiation of Insulin Therapy. *Clinical Diabetes*. 2007;25:36-38.