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# Health Beat



"Team Nick" gathers to walk in support of Nick Heimbigner, during the American Diabetes Step Out for Diabetes walk. Nick is pictured in the red hat, behind the American Diabetes sign.

## A New Outlook

*How one local boy is handling Juvenile Diabetes*

by Blythe Thimsen

**D**RAWING BLOOD IS A GIVEN FOR ACTIVE YOUNG BOYS, WITH their rough and tumble ways, adventurous spirits and limitless energy. Scraped knees, roughed up elbows and an unending series of cuts and scrapes go with the territory. For nine year-old Nick Heimbigner, of Spokane, drawing blood is something he does 12 times a day, not by roughhousing on the playground, but in order to stay alive. Nick has Type 1 Insulin Dependent Juvenile Diabetes.

Type 1 Diabetes is an autoimmune disease in which the body destroys insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas. Without insulin, the body starves to death. To stay alive, people with Type 1 Diabetes must take multiple injections daily or continually infuse through a pump. They must also check their blood sugar level by pricking their finger for blood six or more times a day.

Nick is not alone. According to the National Institutes of Health, an estimated 850,000 to 1.7 million Americans have Type 1 Diabetes, and of those, about 125,000 are kids 19 and under who fall into the Juvenile Diabetes category. Over 13,000 children are diagnosed with the disease each year. That's 35 children each day, or more than one child per hour. There is no known cure for Juvenile Diabetes, and children don't outgrow it; rather, it is a



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## Health Beat

permanent part of their life.

For Nick, the diagnosis came when he was four years old. He had not been feeling well for several days, and his parents, Chad and Suzie Heimbigner, knew something was wrong. "I don't even know if the word is sick; he had a fever, and he just didn't seem himself," says Suzie. "In the back of our heads, we thought something wasn't right. It was parents' intuition." They took him to the doctor and were told he probably just had whatever was going around. A last minute decision by a doctor to run a quick urinalysis changed their lives. They were told Nick had diabetes.

"If you would have told us going in there that we would hear that...we were just in shock," says Suzie. The family spent the next several days getting a crash course in diabetes.

"As a parent, it's not the thing you want to learn. They speak in term of 'chronic disease' and 'life-threatening,'" says Chad. "The first few days and months were overwhelming as we came to grips with the idea that our son had diabetes and his life was going to change; our life was going to change."

### TESTING

Nick started testing his blood sugar immediately, testing six to seven times a day. Nowadays he tests 10 to 12 times per day, with his parents splitting the responsibility of nighttime testings. Chad tests Nick's blood at 1:50 a.m. every morning, while Suzie tests it at 5:40 a.m. each morning.

Nick has switched from insulin shots to an insulin pump, which is "more like a real pancreas than shots," delivering a steady stream of insulin into his system. Nick got his pump right after kindergarten and it accompanies him everywhere he goes. The site at which it connects to his body is changed every few days.

"When we did insulin shots we were a lot more rigid about meal times," says Suzie. "It was hard to be spontaneous and go out for a treat. The pumps make

it much easier."

Nick has an alarm on his watch that reminds him of when to check his blood during the school day. Sometimes his classmates remind him, when they hear the alarm. "At the beginning of the year I always tell my class about it," says Nick of his diabetes. "My friend Collin knows all about it, and whenever I don't feel well, he's the one that takes me to the office." In addition, Nick always keeps a black bag near him, which has a needle and juice for emergencies.

"His school is very supportive," says Chad. "Some people aren't as lucky to have such supportive schools and administrations."

Another asset Nick has at his school is his older brother, Jacob. A sixth grader, Jacob has been on this journey with Nick since the beginning and is very protective of him and watches over him. On his eighth birthday, Jacob did a presentation on diabetes for his family and friends, to educate them about his brother's condition. "He's always had a big heart and is the first to say lets raise money for diabetes, or to do a power point presentation," says Chad.

"Jacob has had to be more responsible because always in the back of his mind is Nick's safety, because he is such a good big brother," says Suzie. "Jacob has this incredible sense of empathy because his little brother has diabetes."

Nick's supportive family is part of what makes his battle with diabetes easier to manage. The family together takes an approach of "we hate diabetes, but it is here, so let's deal with it." The family decided they would all eat the same food, rather than having Nick be denied certain foods that the rest of the family could enjoy.

"It wasn't a huge adjustment because we ate pretty healthy before, but it was a change forever – everything had to be planned," says Suzie. "We decided from the beginning it was for all of us."

Initially, Suzie says she took away all candy, but when she found Nick licking



### Classic symptoms of diabetes:

- \*excessive thirst
- \*excessive urination
- \*excessive hunger
- \*weight loss
- \*fatigue
- \*blurred vision
- \*high blood sugar level
- \*sugar and ketones in the urine

**MYTH: Type 1 Diabetes is caused by eating too much sugar, or by obesity.**

**FACT: While obesity has been identified as one of the "triggers" for type 2 diabetes it has no relation to the cause of Type 1 Diabetes. Eating too much sugar is not a factor.**



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the inside of an empty hot cocoa packet, she realized "this kid needs to be able to have some candy." With moderation, Suzie says she has discovered "there is no bad food with diabetes, you just have to manage your carbs." An apple has carbs and so do M&Ms. If you figure out the number of carbs, it is possible to enjoy a few treats occasionally with diabetes. It is all about managing it. Just like people without diabetes need to make healthy decisions when it comes to what foods to eat, so do people with diabetes.

"While we don't have rules about food, we do have a list of 'sometimes' food," says Suzie. For example, if they know they are going to be eating birthday cake, they will compensate and plan for an especially low-carb meal so that a piece of cake will not throw out strange numbers. "Sometimes we do have to make choices and have to balance out what is more important."

### IMPACT

Children routinely pick up germs, and share cold and flu bugs. For most kids, they power through and let it run its course; for a child with juvenile diabetes, a cold or flu complicates their symptoms. For example, a diabetic child with the stomach flu needs to monitor their sugar levels, which requires eating a certain number of carbs. When you are sick to your stomach, though, and unable to keep food down, it is difficult to maintain your blood sugar levels.

A growth spurt can also wreak havoc on the levels of a child with Type 1 diabetes. As their body grows, their numbers will spike and plunge.

Even something as simple as exercising in P.E. class or running on the playground can impact the blood sugar level of a diabetic child. Nick is required to test his blood before he is able to participate in those activities. He is very responsible about taking charge of his testing in these settings.

"We want to empower him as much as we can because he has to live with this

his whole life," says Suzie. "Even five years into it, we have days where we are still learning. We've learned to never say we have diabetes under control."

"It's tough, but I can get through it," says Nick of life with diabetes. "It is tough at times, but it doesn't make you different, you can still do what everyone else does. You're still the same person, you just have to do more things. It just makes life a little harder."

"We've told him not to let diabetes define who he is," says Chad. "He's had to grow up faster than his peers because he has these responsibilities. That is the hardest part for us."

One thing for which Nick's parents have to feel proud about is that he has never been ashamed of having diabetes. In fact his kindergarten teacher told Suzie that several moms of other students had told her their kids wanted alarm watches and medical ID bracelets like Nick's because they thought they were cool.

Aside from the cool paraphernalia, there can be a silver lining if dealt a life with diabetes, says Jacob. "When you have diabetes, or know someone with it, it might seem like life as you know it will end, which it might, but then a new one begins and you have a new outlook," he says. That upbeat perspective helps his brother during the difficult times.

Over the last five years there have been times when Nick has been in and out of the hospital, which is scary for him and his family, teaching them to always be on guard. "Diabetes is 24/7, it never gives you a break," says Chad. "If you take it head on, it is manageable. We rely on each other, but there are resources and a lot of different organizations out there to help you."

"It has taught me perspective, and we probably all need a refresher in that," says Suzie. "It's the big things in life that are important. It's about this family: we love each other. We have diabetes, which is our cross to bear, but it could be worse. I have bad days and feel sad, but appreci-

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ate what we have."

That sense of appreciation spurs the family to look for ways they can give back to the diabetes community. "We try to be really involved in the diabetes community," says Chad. In an effort to stomp out diabetes, the Heimbigners participate in the annual Step Out for Diabetes fundraiser walk. Team Nick, made up of people who are walking in support of Nick, is always a strong presence on the course. Last year they raised over \$5,000 for Step Out for Diabetes, which is just one of the local diabetes resources.

"We are lucky because we have so many resources here in Spokane," says Chad. Another one of those resources is the Angel Ball Gala, a cocktail party fundraiser held every June, benefiting Juvenile Diabetes.

"It is so overwhelming listening to parents whose children have Juvenile Diabetes, how could you not want to help," asks Julie Delaney, who along with her husband Shane, launched the Angel Ball Gala in 2007. The cause has become dear to their hearts.

The day that the Delaney's youngest son was born was also the day that some very dear friends of theirs were at the hospital where their youngest was being diagnosed with Type 1 Insulin Dependent Juvenile Diabetes. Eight months later, the Delaney's eight month-old son suffered from a "grand mal seizure" and was diagnosed with an uncommon seizure disorder. Having their own child face a short-term medical crisis, their eyes were opened to the difficulty of having an ill child, and they developed a deep understand of the emotional heartache and rollercoaster that parents face. As a way to give back, they created the Angel Ball Gala to help raise funds for Juvenile Diabetes testing supplies.

"The focus of the event is to raise money for testing supplies because the cost of testing supplies can run \$600 per

month," says Delaney. Diabetes is an expensive disease to have. Testing strips run close to one dollar per strip, which means if you drop one or don't get your test accurate, it is like throwing away a dollar. A pump like Nick's can run close to \$7,000. On top of the testing strips and pump, there are the costs of insulin, syringes and pump supplies. As a result, some patients skip occasional tests to save on the cost of strips, or they permanently cut their number of daily tests to save money.

Delaney's goal in creating the Angel Ball Gala was to target people in Spokane who can give up the cost of a typical evening out, and instead donate that money to the Angel Ball Gala. Every dollar raised by the event goes to funding testing supplies for Juvenile Diabetes.

Consistently testing is so important, even though regulating the numbers can sometimes be frustrating. "It is always changing and evolving," says Chad. "You have to keep up with it, but you can't be hard on yourself if you aren't getting the right numbers. You just have to try your best."

"It's taken a while to learn that we are a work in progress," says Suzie. "Chad and I have one goal: we want to take care of Jacob and Nick, diabetes or not. When they are grown up, they are going to be amazing."

Nick has big plans for his future, and diabetes doesn't play a major role in what he wants to do. "I am going to go to culinary school in Paris, France," he says, "and I am going to have a restaurant named Ravir - which means, "delight" in French - and I'm going to paint on the streets." With such great plans, who has time to worry about diabetes? ■

To learn more about the Angel Ball Gala, and supporting local Juvenile Diabetes patients, visit [www.angelballgala.org](http://www.angelballgala.org); to learn more about Stepping Out for Diabetes, visit <http://stepout.diabetes.org>

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