



Diabetes Safety Employee Guide

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Introduction

This guide on diabetes safety, is intended for employees of Being Well Together Supporters. It forms part of a broader set of definitive guides on everything from mental health through to nutrition.

The guide has been put together in partnership with diabetes specialists The Diabetes Safety Organisation. It will help you navigate through the steps you need to take, to achieve the best health and wellbeing outcome for you, the employee. No matter what your position or location, the guide will enable you to assess your current situation, understand any gaps and explore the most effective measures for you.

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk to the Being Well Together liaison person within your organisation or your HR team, to find out what other support is available.

Mike Robinson

Chief Executive

British Safety Council



Background

D iabetes is one of the fastest growing health challenges of the 21st century, with the number of adults living with diabetes having more than tripled over the past 20 years.

- Globally, approximately 463 million adults (20-79 years) were living with diabetes in 2019; by 2045 this is predicted to rise to 700 million
- 1 in 2 (232 million) people with diabetes are undiagnosed
- 374 million people are at increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

In the context of health and safety at work, diabetes can have an impact on productivity, affect eyesight, foot sensation, concentration, time off work. It can cause people to act drunk or pass out and in the long-term lead to kidney failure, lower limb amputation, stroke and heart attacks. The cost on health expenditure alone in 2019 was at least 760 billion USD – 10% of total spending on adults, this does not take into account the impact on companies or social costs.

- In 2016, an estimated 1.6 million deaths were directly caused by diabetes. Another 2.2 million deaths were attributable to high blood glucose in 2012
- WHO estimates that diabetes was the seventh leading cause of death in 2016.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a chronic disease that occurs when the pancreas is no longer able to make insulin, or when the body cannot make good use of the insulin it produces. There are two main types of diabetes:

- Type 1 diabetes develops when the body's immune system attacks and destroys the insulin producing cells in the pancreas, the cause of this is unknown
- Type 2 diabetes is the most common type of diabetes, which develops when the body doesn't make enough insulin or the insulin the body is making is not being used properly.

Signs and Symptoms of Diabetes

- Being very thirsty
- Urinating more frequently, especially at night
- Genital itching or frequent thrush
- Feeling more tired than usual
- Unexplained weight loss and muscle loss
- Poor wound healing
- Blurred vision.

Individual health risk from diabetes:

- Blindness – diabetes is the leading cause in the working population
- Erectile dysfunction – 75% of men suffer from this at some point
- Amputation – 170 a week in the UK
- Increases risk of a heart attack
- Increases risk of a stroke
- Premature death – 500 people die a week
- Diabetes related kidney disease.

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The Guide is published by the British Safety Council, 70 Chancellors Road, London, W6 9RS, United Kingdom. To order further printed copies, please login to the Being Well Together website and order from there.

The impact of diabetes on your mental health

The association between diabetes and depression has been well known for at least three decades. Major advances in the past two decades have improved understanding of the biological basis for the relationship between depression and diabetes.

A bidirectional relationship might exist between type 2 diabetes and depression: just as type 2 diabetes increases the risk for onset of major depression, a major depressive disorder signals increased risk for onset of type 2 diabetes.

Dr Partha Kar Associate National Clinical Director, Diabetes with NHS England leading on digital innovation says “It’s potentially the most devastating health crisis of our time. Diabetes can affect all aspects of someone’s life, and we know that people with diabetes experience disproportionately high rates of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders.”

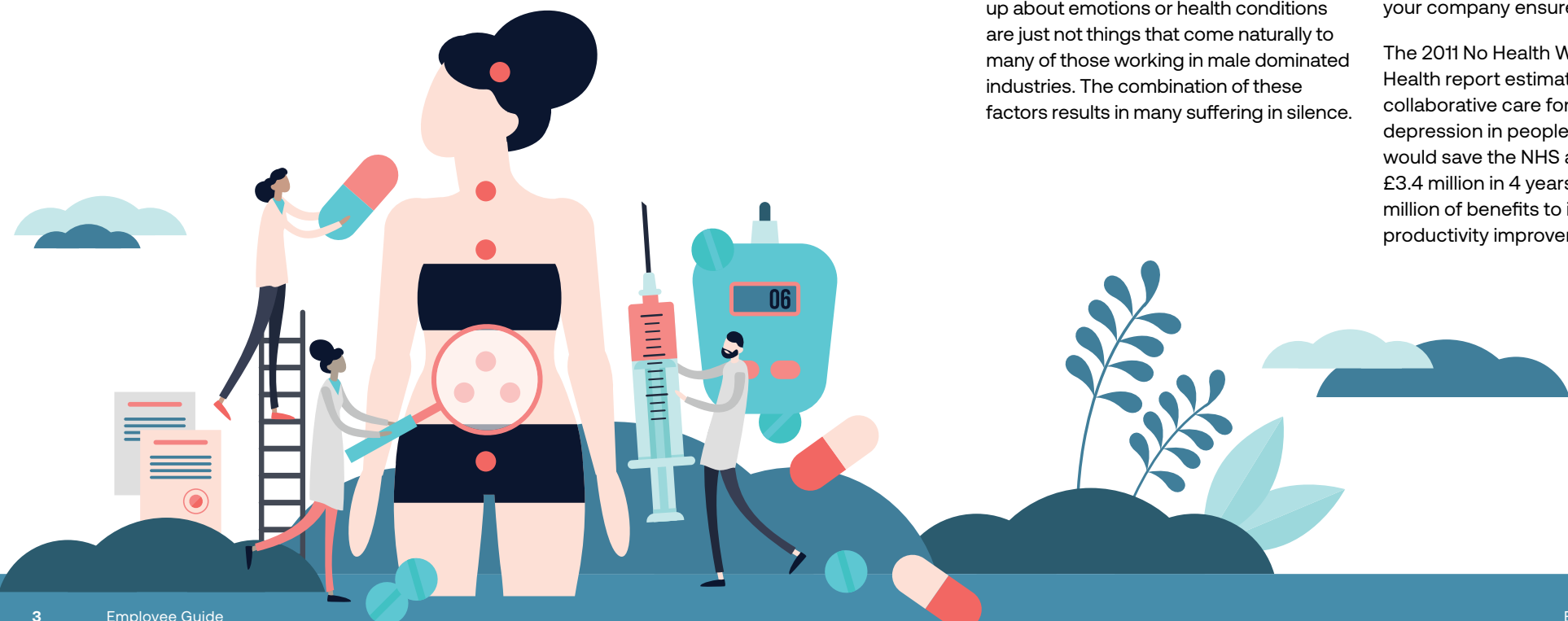
Three in five people with diabetes experience emotional or mental health problems and male site workers in construction are three times more likely to commit suicide than the average UK male. These shocking mental health statistics are a vivid reminder of the difficulties faced by many working in industries like construction every day.

In any workforce that is predominantly male, specific risks associated with male mental health and healthy lifestyle choices also need to be considered along with the “tough guy” image that might be widespread. Asking for help and opening up about emotions or health conditions are just not things that come naturally to many of those working in male dominated industries. The combination of these factors results in many suffering in silence.

People with diabetes and mental health problems show poorer compliance with treatment recommendations than people with diabetes without depression, and more frequently have cardiovascular risk factors such as smoking, obesity, sedentary lifestyle and poor glycaemic (sugar) control, which can impact on their health-related quality of life.

Poor glycaemic (sugar) control could lead to a person acting as if drunk or blacking out, putting themselves, other staff and the company at risk of litigation. The DVLA expects those on higher medications to be testing before driving machinery, does your company ensure this is happening?

The 2011 No Health Without Mental Health report estimated that introducing collaborative care for the treatment of depression in people with type 2 diabetes would save the NHS and social care about £3.4 million in 4 years, with a further £11.7 million of benefits to individuals owing to productivity improvement.



Fitness to drive

Ensuring medical fitness to drive is an important safety measure if you have diabetes and is a prerequisite for a driving licence in many countries. In the UK, the DVLA has strict guidelines in place for people with diabetes, both type 1 and type 2, who need to take insulin. The DVLA states, 'people on insulin must check glucose levels no more than two hours before driving, followed by repeat tests during breaks for every two hours of driving.' This helps prevent the risk of a fatal hypoglycaemic attack without imposing blanket bans as many people have their diabetes under control.

This simple measure ensures greater safety across the UK's road network. However, these measures do not apply off road, for example, on sites, in warehouses, on production lines and on private land. The Diabetes Safety Organisation argue that some of the largest and most dangerous machines are used in these environments and yet no safety measures for those with diabetes are applied. In their charter they encourage the adoption of simple two hourly testing for all workers with diabetes on insulin, on all types of machinery, irrespective of location.



Making your workplace safe

Diabetes affects organisations' health care costs and productivity, so supporting workers with diabetes is both the right thing to do and a smart business decision. In many countries it will also fall under Acts such as the Equality Act in the UK and in America the Disabilities Act. If you suffer with diabetes, there are things you can do.

1. Because testing is essential to the management of diabetes to control and prevent complications, where possible allow time for this during your day. If you don't have this already, why not ask your employer for a private and hygienic area in which to do this.
2. Awareness in the workplace can ensure that all colleagues are aware of the symptoms of hypoglycaemia and know how to help you if needed.
3. There should be no restriction in the type of job you can do if you have diabetes, however, some safety critical jobs may have requirements that are difficult to meet. If you have diabetes, you must be assessed individually for these roles and not blanketly excluded.
4. You should get your eyes tested regularly, to ensure that you are fit to perform your duties. Hypoglycaemia can temporarily or even permanently affect vision due to poor diabetes control.
5. You may need a risk assessment when in safety critical environments as you may be at risk of episodes of hypoglycaemia which can cause sudden incapacity and high blood sugar levels causing blurred vision. Having diabetes doesn't mean you have to give up driving but if you are on insulin you are required to notify the DVLA. There are some tablets that mean you need to notify the DVLA as well.
6. As with all chronic illness, diabetes may affect your emotional wellbeing. Diabetes can be challenging and time-consuming to control and it is well known that people with diabetes are more prone to depression. In addition, stress affects blood sugar control. It is not uncommon for people diagnosed with diabetes to feel overwhelmed and frustrated by their disease. You should make your employer aware of this and ask for support as appropriate by accessing help either through your GP or a counsellor.
7. Although many factors lead to the development of diabetes, the major controllable risk factors are body weight and physical activity. You should take a holistic approach to your health and wellness. The 'One Less Challenge' can have a significant impact. One less spoonful of sugar in a drink, 6 drinks a day is 1kg less of sugar a month, 12kg less a year.

For further information: <https://diabetessafety.org>