



your HEALTH

As a 10-year-old, a doctor gave me an injection of insulin and almost immediately I began to feel fantastic. I just remember how good it was to feel ‘normal’ again

There can be few people today who have not had heard of diabetes or know someone affected by the condition. At the same time, it is often associated with lifestyle and being overweight.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Many people are not aware of the serious and potentially life-changing and life-threatening complications to which it can lead, including blindness and amputations.

Joanne Appleby has lived with diabetes for more than four decades.

She was just 10 when she was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, which is unpreventable and can affect anyone, at any age.

Joanne, from Wymeswold, said: “I don’t remember very much about it at the time.

“But I lost a lot of weight and did nothing but drink. I can also remember becoming quite lethargic and it was very noticeable because I used to do a lot gym and sports.

“I had a test done through

Over the years, Joanne Appleby, from Wymeswold, has found that the public has grown in awareness of diabetes and its life-changing and complications. She talks to **CATHY BUSS**

our GP and I can remember one evening the doctor, who was a leading specialist in diabetes, coming to our house in Rushey Mead, where we were living at the time.

“I can remember him explaining to my parents what life would be like going forward.

“I was feeling quite ill at the time and had never heard of diabetes, it came out of the blue.”

The doctor took the youngster aside to explain what it would mean for her.

Joanne, now 51, said: “There was a big glass syringe and I think I was quite scared and shocked.

“But then he gave me an injection of insulin and almost immediately I began to feel fantastic.

“I just remember how good it was to feel ‘normal’ again.

“I think my parents were more upset than I was.”

Joanne was the first person in her school to be diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

She said: “I had to stand up in assembly and tell people about it, which I didn’t really like.

“I can also remember having to sit by the side of the pool in the swimming lesson and made to eat a Kit-Kat – no-one really understood diabetes in those days.

“I was quite shocked when I got to senior school and there

was another girl with diabetes.”

But the past 40 years have seen great strides in treatment for Type 1 diabetes.

When Joanne was first diagnosed, needles were reused to administer the much-needed insulin.

She said: “The syringes had to be kept in surgical spirit and sterilised in boiling water.

“Then I remember some strange device which looked

rather a like a gun and you pulled the trigger.

“Now I have small sort of pen device which you can carry in your bag.

“There is a cartridge with a needle and you can dial in to see how much insulin you need to take. It is fantastic.”

While Joanne, who has two grown-up daughters, “just gets on with it” there is a constant reminder of the disease.

She has to have regular blood tests and check-ups.

One of the most important is a check for diabetic retinopathy, as persistently high blood sugar levels can damage blood vessels in the eye.

If left untreated, this can lead to blindness.

Joanne said: “I did have to have laser treatment about 20 years ago as there were some tiny bleeds in my eye. They have been fine since then but I do have to have regular checks.”

“I am not the best in the world with my diabetes and there are some difficult days, but I do just try and get on with it.”

People can also e mail: careline@diabetes.org.uk www.diabetes.org.uk

THE Royal Institute of Blind People offers help, information and support. It also runs a phone helpline on 0303 123 9999 or by e mail to: helpline@mib.org.uk www.mib.org.uk

There is a telephone helpline for anyone affected by diabetes, from patients to family and friends. It is open Monday to Friday, from 9am-7pm on 0345 123 2399.

THEY CAN HELP

VISTA is the Leicestershire charity for people with vision impairment or sight loss. It helps people coping with sight loss both emotionally and with practical support. A phone helpline is open Monday to Thursday, 9am-5pm, and on Friday, 9am-4.30pm on 0116 249 8839. www.vistablind.org.uk

DIABETES UK helps people affected by both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes. It also provides information on complications including diabetic retinopathy.

GET IN TOUCH: Have you struggled with a difficult health problem? We want to tell your story. Contact our health correspondent Cathy Buss on 0116 222 4261, e-mail catherinebuss@leicestermercury.co.uk



PICTURE: BETH WALSH
GETTING ON WITH LIFE: Joanne Appleby

THE FACTS DIABETIC RETINOPATHY

DIABETIC retinopathy is a complication of diabetes and needs to be regularly checked.

High blood sugar levels can, over a period of time, damage blood vessels in the eye.

There are three stages. Firstly, tiny bulges develop in the blood vessels which may bleed slightly but do not usually affect vision.

Secondly, there can be more severe and widespread changes, including bleeding into the eye.

Thirdly, scar tissue and new blood vessels which are weak and bleed easily develop on the retina and can result in some loss of vision.

People with Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes are at risk from diabetic retinopathy. The risk is greater in those



CHECK-UP: Screening for diabetic retinopathy

with high blood pressure and cholesterol and a persistently high blood sugar level.

People from Asian or Afro Caribbean communities are also at greater risk.

Signs can include gradually worsening vision or sudden vision loss, blurred or patchy vision, eye pain or redness.

Anyone over 12 should be offered regular screening which involves taking a photograph of the back of the eye to detect changes.

The main treatments are with a laser, injections or an operation to remove blood or scar tissue.

ASK THE EXPERT

AMAR Alwitary is a consultant ophthalmologist who regularly sees patients with diabetic retinopathy.

He said: “Diabetes is becoming more common and we could soon be facing increasing patient numbers.

“Diabetes causes malfunction of the network of blood vessels supplying the retina – this is what is known as diabetic retinopathy.

“The fine blood vessels at the back of the eye can become blocked or leak which results in poor vision if untreated.

“Burst blood vessels, leaky blood vessels and the formation of fragile new blood vessels that can bleed into the eye are the signs of diabetic retinopathy.

“If the leaky blood vessels directly affect the

INCREASING PATIENT NUMBERS: Amar Alwitary



macula – the central portion of the retina – then the vision can go down.

“However, often patients would not know there is a problem.

“This is why it is vital that they have their eyes checked regularly if they have diabetes.”

Checks are usually carried out within the diabetic retinopathy screening service or at hospital with an ophthalmologist.

The risk of retinopathy and sight loss can be significantly lowered if the patient has good control over their diabetes.

Mr Alwitary said: “It is also important for patients to make sure

their blood pressure and cholesterol levels are okay. “It goes without saying but smoking is a big no in diabetics.

“Patients from, who have family from, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka are more at risk of developing diabetes and the sight-threatening conditions diabetes can cause.”

While most patients will have only minimal changes sight-threatening problems can occur and they need to be detected and treated.

Mr Alwitary said: “Treatment is by laser but more recently new injection therapies have come to the fore.

“If people attend the screening service regularly then we can keep them safe and protect their vision.”