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BY TERRI D'ARRIGO

A MATTER OF BALANCE

Insulin And Weight Gain

Insulin is the most powerful treatment for diabetes. Unfortunately, it has one potentially frustrating side effect: weight gain. Studies such as the landmark United Kingdom Prospective Diabetes Study suggest the average weight gain for those new to insulin therapy is about 9 pounds.

But gaining a few pounds when you first start taking insulin is a sign the insulin is working, says Roger P. Austin, MS, RPh, CDE, clinical pharmacy specialist with the Henry Ford Health System in Sterling Heights, Mich. "It's a one-way drug. It drives glucose from the blood into muscle for energy and fat for storage," he says. "If you see some weight gain, it means your metabolism is becoming reestablished."

Still, if you're trying to lose weight, seeing the number on the scale creep up can be discouraging. Fortunately, there are ways to minimize insulin-related weight gain. The key lies in working very carefully with your doctor, diabetes educator, and dietitian.

"The challenge for both patient and practitioner is finding out what the optimal dose is," says Austin. "Too much

insulin, and you'll have too many lows and you'll eat more to treat them. That adds weight gain on top of weight gain. But if you don't take enough, your glucose will remain too high."

He suggests the following tips to help you adjust to taking insulin without sacrificing your waistline.

Shoot for maintenance, first. "When you first start insulin, don't focus on losing more weight. Focus on not gaining new weight," he says. Once your weight stabilizes and you're used to your new care routine, then you might consider trying to lose again.

Review your medications. Some diabetes pills, such as thiazolidinediones (TZDs or "glitazones"), can cause weight gain by themselves, he says. "Part of that is because they redistribute fat in the body, and part is fluid retention. If you've gained weight on them, and then you add insulin, the extra weight gain can be significant." His advice is to talk to your doctor about possibly changing your other medications.

Get thee some diabetes education. "Your care plan should be individualized," Austin says. "Your educator, particularly

your dietitian, can help you understand how your eating habits affect how much insulin you'll have to take and how that can affect your weight."

He adds that you'll also need to develop a thorough understanding of carbohydrates and insulin. "You need to know the ratio. If all you're doing is treating [blood glucose] numbers [as you check them], you'll have some problems regulating your insulin doses correctly."

Work out. Once you're used to taking insulin and your weight stabilizes, physical activity will help you get back on the path to weight loss. Bonus: Exercise increases insulin sensitivity in your muscles, so you may be able to lower your dose.

If you've been trying to lose weight, taking a medication that can cause weight gain might be the last thing you want to do. But once your blood glucose is under control, you'll feel better. You'll have more energy and your mood will improve, and that will empower you to make the lifestyle changes necessary for weight loss.

Terri D'Arrigo is an associate editor of Diabetes Forecast.