

Cycling Tips for Diabetics

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I am writing this not as a medical practitioner, but instead as a Type I diabetic who is an avid triathlete and cyclist who is hoping to help others in the same situation, especially if you are newly diagnosed, or have been diabetic for a while but are new to cycling. Some of this information I have learned through experience, while some of it I have picked up at conferences for diabetic athletes (more on that later). So please take this information just as advice and if you have any questions you should check with your doctor or diabetes educator. Here are some things that you might find helpful:

1. Continuous Glucose Monitor (CGM) I have been using one for about a year and it has given me great peace of mind. That is because the CGM is constantly reading your blood sugars, and can be set to make a beeping sound when either your blood sugar gets below a certain level, or if it is dropping quickly. Over the past five years and prior to riding with a CGM, I had several low blood sugars while biking, with one causing me to lose control of my bike and crash. It is also helpful to explain to your fellow riders that if you start beeping, they should start nagging you to stop and check your blood sugar, or to eat a gu, just in case the low comes on so quickly that you are not acting responsibly. I admit that there have been a few times when my CGM alarm went off and my response was to say "I'm fine – no need to stop!" when I wasn't fine and DID need to stop (sadly, low blood sugars can make diabetics illogical or even belligerent when asked if they might be low – warn your friends about this too!).
2. Insulin pump settings and food intake I have figured out how to adjust my pump settings and my food intake to minimize low blood sugars while riding. For example, I have discovered that I need to take NO insulin with my breakfast prior to a ride, while I would normally take 5 units if not riding. Along with that, I turn my pump down to 70% of the usual basal rate for the entire ride. And if I am riding long, I consume 25 – 40 g of carbohydrates every hour or so depending on the intensity of the ride – either a gu or an energy bar, or if on a charity ride and available – cookies or PB&J. And I do NOT take insulin with those carbs, unless my blood sugar is up over 200, and then I take a much smaller bolus than usual.
3. Check that blood sugar! If you are not on a CGM, check your blood sugar every time you stop with your meter. Be careful that you do not use a finger that might have gu residue or granola bar residue on it (or anything sweet and sticky) – that can greatly skew your readings on the high side! DO NOT BE SHY about asking your group to stop every hour or so just long enough for you to do a check at a stop sign. They are much better off taking a quick break than they are having you turn into a crazy cyclist.
4. Try not to ride alone This is tricky – sometimes you just can't avoid riding alone. However, if you do, I suggest keeping your blood sugar a bit higher than usual. Have an extra snack before getting on the bike, and take extra snacks with you.
5. Wear a medical ID Very important for EMS to know your situation if you are in a wreck and unresponsive or have a hypoglycemic incident.
6. Work with an expert There are several great resources in the area. Joe Largay (Physician's Assistant) and Camille Izlar (Diabetes Educator) out of Duke Endocrinology are both type I diabetics and athletes. They can help you figure out how to adjust your insulin dosages and food intake so that you stay safe. Even if your doctor is not out of Duke, most doctors are willing to send you to a resource such as this for a consultation.
7. Other resources Diabetes Exercise and Sports Association (DESA) has on-line information and annual regional conferences for diabetic athletes. I learned much of the above through DESA conferences and made some good friends at the same time. Great way to meet others in your situation and learn from them, plus from medical experts and coaches with practical experience with diabetic athletes. Check it out at <http://www.diabetes-exercise.org/>.