

Your Care at Home: Taking Insulin

Narrator

Insulin is a hormone that lowers your blood sugar and is used to treat diabetes. Everyone who has type 1 diabetes needs insulin injections, or shots. And some people with type 2 diabetes also need insulin shots to keep their blood sugar under control. The idea of insulin shots may sound a little scary, but my friend and I will walk you through it, step by step, whether you use a syringe or an insulin pen.

First let's talk about the syringe. To give yourself an insulin shot, gather up your supplies: the insulin, a syringe, an alcohol swab and a puncture-proof sharps disposal container. And always wash your hands before you start.

Check the expiration on the insulin to make sure it's still good. If your insulin is supposed to be cloudy, roll the vial between your hands, but DON'T shake it. Clear insulin doesn't require this step. Your doctor or nurse will tell you whether your insulin will be cloudy or clear.

Now, clean the top of your vial with an alcohol swab. Take the caps off the syringe needle and plunger. Then pull the plunger back to the amount of insulin you will be taking. For example, if you will be taking 10 units of insulin draw the plunger back to where the top of the rubber is at 10.

Next, push the needle all the way into the center of the rubber top and push the plunger all the way down until it stops. This step will help make it easier to draw insulin from your bottle in the future. Turn the vial (with the syringe still inserted) upside down. Quickly pull back on the syringe a little past the amount of insulin you need.

Now, slowly push the plunger until it reaches the right insulin dose for you. Check for bubbles in the syringe. They might cause you to not get enough insulin. If you see bubbles, push the insulin back into the vial and try again. Or take the needle out, hold it upright, and flick the side of the syringe with your finger to see if the bubbles escape. Choose the site where you will give your shot, usually in the upper arm, thigh or abdomen. The abdomen is easiest and most stable.

Now clean your skin with the alcohol swab and let it dry. If you don't have alcohol, just make sure the area is clean and dry. Hold your syringe like a pencil, keeping your thumb off the plunger, to keep the insulin in the syringe until you're ready for it. Then push the needle quickly through your skin and push in the plunger with your thumb. Then remove the needle and press your finger with the alcohol swab over the injection spot.

Another way to get your insulin is by using an insulin pen. For many people, pens are less scary and easier to use. An insulin pen looks like a large fountain pen and it's meant to either be thrown away or reused. Disposable pens come with insulin already in the pen. Reusable pens use cartridges. Both types require you to replace the needle with each use. You can keep the pen in your pocket or purse as long as it's at room temperature usually for about a month. The supplies you'll need are the insulin pen, an un-used pen needle, an alcohol swab and a puncture-proof container to dispose of the needle.

Wash and dry your hands before you prepare your pen. Check the expiration date on the insulin to make sure it's still good. If your insulin is supposed to be cloudy, roll the vial between your hands, but DON'T shake it. Clear insulin doesn't require this step. Your doctor or nurse will tell you whether your insulin will be cloudy or clear.

Now, take the cap off of your pen and clean the rubber stopper with the alcohol swab. Next, take the paper shield off of your pen needle. Make sure you screw the pen needle on STRAIGHT. Remove the outer cap of the needle. Don't throw this away. You'll need it later. Now take off the inner cap. This you can throw out. Dial a test dose of 2 units to prime the pen. Press the injection button all the way in. While you're doing this, make sure insulin is coming out of the needle. If there is no insulin, test 2 more times. If there still isn't any insulin, make sure the needle is twisted on properly, or replace the needle and try again.

Look at the dosing window to make sure it's at zero. Dial in your dose. Choose the site for your shot, usually in the upper arm, thigh or abdomen. The abdomen is easiest and most stable. Now clean your skin with the alcohol swab and let it dry. If you don't have alcohol, just make sure the area is clean and dry. Hold the pen so that you can see the dosing window, but keep your thumb off the injection button.

Remember...thumb up! Keeping the pen straight, quickly insert the needle into your skin. The faster, the better. It hurts less. Now put your thumb on the injection button, push it in and hold it until you see zero in the dosing window. **DO NOT TAKE THE NEEDLE OUT OF YOUR SKIN.** Count to 10 slowly, then release your thumb, and remove the needle from your skin. Press your finger with the alcohol swab over the spot.

It's very important that you take off the needle every time you give yourself an injection. Do not re-use needles. Use the outer cap that you saved from earlier to screw off or pull the needle from the pen. Then put the pen cap back on the pen.

Whether you use a syringe or a pen, it's always important to properly dispose of your sharps, or needles. Use a puncture proof sharps container or a hard plastic bottle. Your doctor or nurse can tell you where you can throw away this container when it's full. The rules are different depending on where you live.

A few more tips about taking insulin:

- Giving a shot of insulin into the same spot every time can be a problem, so rotate your sites.
- Most likely, the amount of insulin you need will change over time.
- Ask your doctor or nurse when and how often to check your blood sugar, what your numbers should be, and how often to report them.
- Open insulin can be kept at room temperature for up to one month, but don't let it get too warm or be exposed to direct sunlight.
- Extra, unopened insulin, insulin pens and cartridges should be kept in the refrigerator.
- Never freeze insulin.
- One side effect of insulin use can be low blood sugar. Always carry some glucose tablets or hard candy with you, in case you start feeling odd, extremely hungry, sweaty or shaky.
- Finally, however you get your insulin, your doctor or nurse should watch you prepare and take your first insulin shot. It's nice to have someone standing by in case you have any questions.