

# DIABETES IN TV AND FICTION

TOP TIPS FOR WRITERS



**DIABETES UK**  
CARE. CONNECT. CAMPAIGN.

# DIABETES

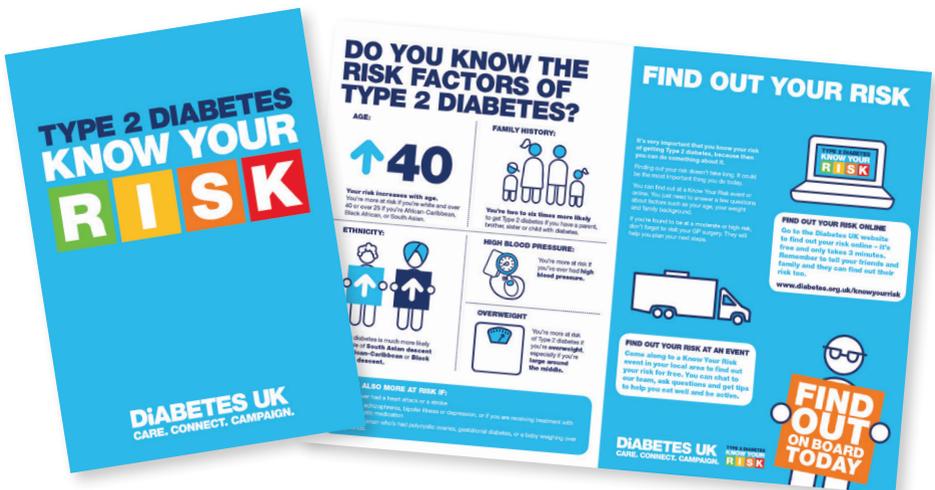
## AN INTRODUCTION

**We are in the middle of a diabetes epidemic. With over 4 million people in the UK living with the condition, including a staggering 549,000 people who are living with Type 2 diabetes but are yet to be diagnosed, the crisis has never been greater.**

This complex and widely misunderstood condition is impacting on our lives and the lives of the people we love and care about.

TV and drama can be incredibly helpful in raising awareness, but they can also confuse public perception around the condition, especially if diabetes is not portrayed in the correct way.

We have designed this guide for writers as our supporters often approach us raising concerns around the way diabetes is conveyed on TV. We hope you will find it a useful resource.



## WHAT IS DIABETES?

Diabetes is a complex condition, and we can understand why there is so much confusion. The inside of our bodies and how they work can baffle even the most scientific of minds.

Diabetes is a condition where there is too much glucose in the blood because the body cannot use it as it should.

Insulin is a hormone, released by the pancreas which enables glucose to enter the muscles and cells, which is then used as fuel.

Diabetes develops because the pancreas does not produce any insulin, or not enough, or the insulin it does produce is unable to work properly.



# TWO MAIN TYPES OF DIABETES

**Many people assume diabetes is a single condition, but actually there are two distinct main types, as well as other less common forms.**

**It is important when writers include diabetes in a storyline or feature that they make clear which type of diabetes they are portraying and distinguish it clearly from other types.**

## TYPE 1 DIABETES

Type 1 diabetes develops when the insulin-producing cells in the body have been destroyed and the body is unable to produce any insulin. Everyone with Type 1 diabetes has to be treated with insulin.

### WHAT CAUSES IT?

Nobody knows for sure why these insulin-producing cells have been destroyed but the most likely cause is the body having an abnormal (autoimmune) reaction to the cells. This may be triggered by a virus or other infection.

There is thought to be a genetic element to Type 1 diabetes and it is much more common in some parts of the world than others. *But it has nothing to do with lifestyle or weight.*

It can develop at any age but usually appears before the age of 40 and most commonly in late childhood.

### HOW COMMON IS IT?

About 10 per cent of the 3.5million people diagnosed with diabetes in the UK have Type 1 diabetes.

## TYPE 2 DIABETES

Type 2 diabetes develops when the body still makes some insulin, but not enough, or when the insulin that is produced does not work properly (known as insulin resistance).

Initially, Type 2 diabetes may be controlled with a healthy diet and regular physical activity. Medication is also often required and a minority of people eventually progress to needing insulin to manage their Type 2 diabetes.

### WHAT CAUSES IT?

People are more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes if they are overweight, have a large waist; have a close relative with diabetes; or are from an African-Caribbean, Black African, Chinese or South Asian background.

Risk in these communities increases from the age of 25. In other communities, risk increases after the age of 40.

### HOW COMMON IS IT?

About 90 per cent of the 3.5 million people diagnosed with diabetes in the UK have Type 2 diabetes. There are

also an estimated 549,000 people with undiagnosed Type 2 diabetes.

11.9 million people in the UK are at increased risk of getting Type 2 diabetes.

Some people may be told by their healthcare professional that they have 'prediabetes'. It's not a term we use, but it can be used by some to describe when a person has higher than normal blood glucose levels and is at risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.



## Diabetes is one of the biggest health challenges we face today.

There are over 4 million people living with diabetes in the UK, and the situation is likely to get even worse.

If nothing changes, the number of people with the condition is expected to reach 5 million by 2025.

This means diabetes is an issue that merits news coverage and storylines on TV. For one thing, **one in 16** of your viewers or listeners are likely to have diabetes and many more will know someone who has it.

Despite the seriousness of the condition, diabetes healthcare is often not good enough and there is a **postcode lottery of care**. In the best performing areas, over two thirds of people with diabetes get the checks recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and equivalent bodies in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In other areas, barely one in 10 people get this level of care. There are also **huge variations** in rates of complications.

This is not a result of inadequate funding. The problem is that much of it **is not being spent on the right things**, with much of it used to treat complications that could have been avoided if people had received the healthcare needed to manage their condition in the first place.

Diabetes UK is not alone in its concerns. The National Audit Office has concluded that diabetes healthcare in England **does not represent value for money** and that **poorly performing areas are not being held to account**. Even the Government has admitted that the low proportions of people getting their checks in some areas is '**outrageous**' and '**unacceptable**'.

What's needed now is **better public understanding** of the seriousness of diabetes and the political will to demand improvements in healthcare for people with the condition.

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Often, diabetes can be misunderstood, and we can see why. It isn't an easy condition to understand. But getting it right is key, especially when you are reaching a wide audience with a storyline, and even with what may just be seen as an off-the-cuff comment.

These fleeting comments, scenes or long-running storylines about diabetes can, if done in the right way, help people to understand the condition, and raise crucial awareness. But if clinically or factually incorrect, they can lead to misunderstanding around diabetes and upset and confuse many people.

**'It's not a kids party unless the kids get diabetes'** – line from a soap opera in 2016.

Comments like this are incredibly upsetting for people living with the everyday realities of the condition. Put simply, **diabetes is no joking matter.**

If diabetes is properly managed then people with the condition can live long and healthy lives. As one person living with diabetes describes it *'Managed properly, diabetes can be like a kitten, but without the correct management, it becomes a roaring lion, destroying everything in its wake.'*

Uncontrolled diabetes can lead to devastating consequences such as amputations, loss of sight, kidney failure, strokes, all of which can lead to an early death. The devastating thing is that, with the right care, many of these deaths might have been prevented.

So it's hard-hitting stuff and it is happening right now. Put simply, the truth about diabetes goes so much deeper than one would ever expect.

## THE IMPACT OF A STORYLINE

Many of us spend several hours a day watching TV. Scenarios are played out on screens throughout the UK, and there is often nothing better than all sitting down together to watch a television show.

If a diabetes story is portrayed in an incorrect way, it can be very damaging.

Imagine you are a parent and your child has just been diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. The impact is felt at the very core of the family. A throw-away comment or incorrect storyline can create ripples in the life of someone with diabetes, especially if it is blaming the person for their own condition. This is especially key when it comes to children as it can lead to bullying.

# DIABETES MYTHS

**From its causes to how it can be best managed, there are lots of myths around diabetes.**

**Here are some of the most common.**

## **PEOPLE WITH DIABETES CANNOT HAVE SUGAR**

Having diabetes doesn't mean having to have a sugar-free diet. People with diabetes should follow a healthy, balanced diet low in fat, salt and sugar, but they should still be able to enjoy a wide variety of foods, including some with sugar.

## **IT'S NOT SAFE TO DRIVE IF YOU HAVE DIABETES**

If people with diabetes are responsible and have good control of their blood glucose levels, they are no less safe on the roads than anyone else. Nevertheless, the myth persists that all people with diabetes are unsafe to drive.

## **TYPE 2 DIABETES IS A MILD FORM OF DIABETES**

This is wrong. There is no such thing as mild form of diabetes. All diabetes is serious and if not properly controlled it can lead to serious complications such as amputation, kidney failure, blindness and stroke.

## **PEOPLE WITH DIABETES SHOULD EAT ‘DIABETIC’ FOODS**

Diabetes UK doesn't recommend 'diabetic' foods for people with diabetes because these foods are high in fat and calories and still affect blood glucose levels. They are expensive and can cause diarrhoea. If people want to treat themselves occasionally then they should go for the real thing.

## **CHILDREN WITH DIABETES MUST HAVE EATEN A LOT OF SUGAR**

Actually, the vast majority of children with diabetes have Type 1 diabetes, which is not linked to diet or lifestyle at all.

## **ALL PEOPLE WITH DIABETES ARE OVERWEIGHT**

This is wrong. Being overweight does increase risk of Type 2 diabetes, but there are other risk factors that play an important part, such as age, family history, and ethnicity.

## **PEOPLE WITH DIABETES CAN'T PLAY SPORT**

People with diabetes are encouraged to exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle and keeping active can help reduce the risk of complications such as heart disease. Steve Redgrave, Olympic gold medal-winning rower, is an example of someone who has achieved great sporting achievements while living with diabetes.

# TOP TIPS

## FOR WRITING A DIABETES-RELATED STORYLINE OR REFERRING TO DIABETES

### IT'S NO JOKE

An off-the-cuff comment, be it about sugar giving people diabetes, or a sarcastic diabetes-related comment about weight or diabetes management can lead to misunderstanding of the condition.

### WHICH TYPE?

Remember, diabetes isn't a one size fits all condition. When covering a diabetes storyline, always remember that there are two main types of diabetes, Type 1 and Type 2, and both are managed very differently. There are also lesser known types of diabetes including Gestational and MODY.

**'Carry on like that and you are heading for a one way ticket to diabetes central'**  
– Line from a TV show in 2015.

### BE AUTHENTIC

Speak to us here at Diabetes UK if you are unsure of any element to the story. We can advise and in some cases put you in touch with someone who has gone through a similar experience.

### LANGUAGE

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to talking about diabetes. Some of our supporters tell us they prefer to be called 'people with diabetes' rather than 'diabetics'. It is what they have, not who they are.

### THINK ABOUT THE BUILD UP AND RISK FACTORS

Many people are unaware of the risk factors and symptoms when it comes to Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes. They may have symptoms for a long time before doing something about it. Highlighting these symptoms can raise awareness in a truly positive way.

### ENSURE YOU PORTRAY TRUE REFLECTION OF THE CONDITION

If it is true-to-life, featuring characters with diabetes can help the general public recognise the impact of living with this life-long condition. Getting it wrong, however, can often cause a negative or incorrect stereotype of what it is like to live with diabetes.

### RESEARCH

Research is key. Speak to people living with the condition. Talk to us here at Diabetes UK as we are always happy to help and offer guidance.

# WHAT DIABETES UK CAN DO FOR YOU

**We can** offer support on all aspects of living with diabetes. We can advise on use of language, and we are happy to work with you on characters and scripts so that you portray diabetes accurately.

---

**We can** provide case studies.

---

**We can** fact check.

---

**We can** provide data, information on treatment and clinical advice.

---

## Find out more:

**Call**            **020 7424 1165** (National media team\*)

**Email**        **PressTeam@diabetes.org.uk**

**Go to**        **[www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)**

\***If it's urgent you can call 07711 176028 out of hours.**

**We also have media teams in Scotland (call 0141 245 6380); Wales (call 029 2066 8276); and Northern Ireland (call 028 9066 6646).**

## **NATIONAL OFFICES**

---

### **DIABETES UK CENTRAL**

Macleod House, 10 Parkway  
London NW1 7AA  
T: 020 7424 1000

### **DIABETES UK CYMRU**

Argyle House, Castlebridge  
Cowbridge Road East  
Cardiff CF11 9AB  
T: 029 2066 8276

### **DIABETES UK NORTHERN IRELAND**

Bridgewood House  
Newforge Business Park  
Newforge Lane  
Belfast BT9 5NW  
T: 028 9066 6646

### **DIABETES SCOTLAND**

The Venlaw, 349 Bath Street  
Glasgow G2 4AA  
T: 0141 245 6380

**DiABETES UK**  
**CARE. CONNECT. CAMPAIGN.**

[www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)

A charity registered in England and Wales (215199) and  
in Scotland (SC039136). © Diabetes UK 2016 0399A.