

My Battle With Diabetes

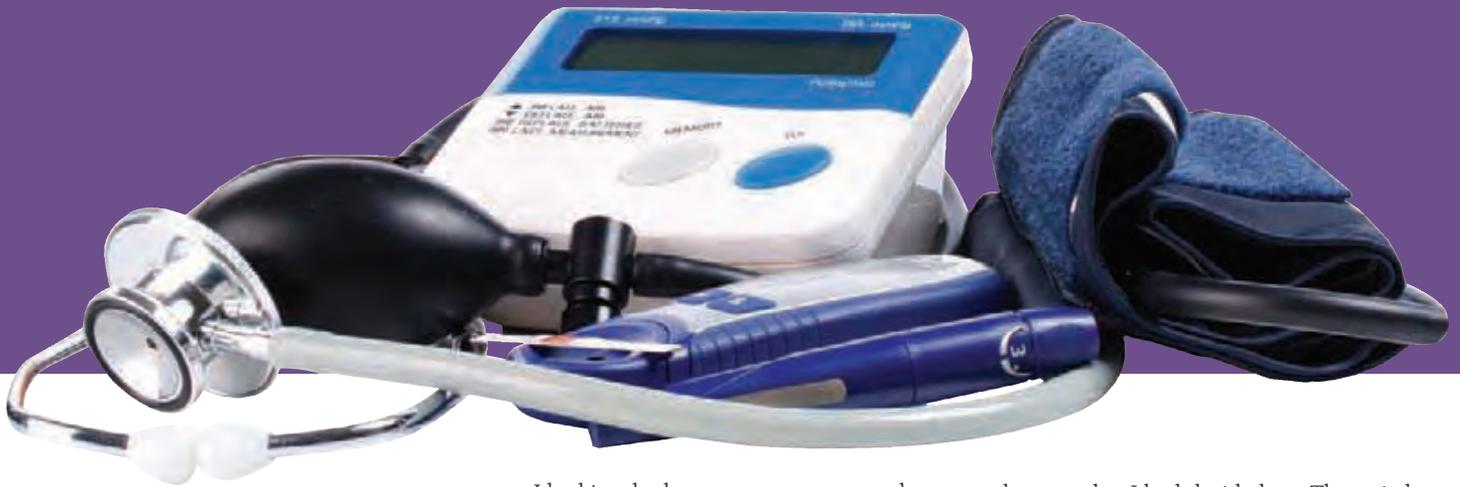
by Melvin Miles

I am a Native American (Nez Perce/Navajo) living with diabetes. I was 40 years old when I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes after a yearly physical. I weighed 310 pounds at the time – at 5 feet 10 inches tall, I looked like a brick. I didn't watch what I was eating and I had a drinking problem. These problems ran in our family – my dad had diabetes, leading to his death, and my mother had high blood pressure. My doctor and I had a long discussion on how to deal with this problem. I saw a nutritionist and learned how to eat the right foods to control my sugar levels without taking medications.

I came back 3 months later for hemoglobin (A1C) testing to see how I was doing. My blood sugar levels were still high, in the 350-400 range. I was prescribed metformin and blood pressure pills and given a glucose meter; I was told I had to test before and after meals every day. I did this, but I told myself I didn't need to follow all the rules. I thought things would be OK since I played different sports, so I just kept on doing all the wrong things. This went on for a couple of years – then I started to get blisters on the bottom of my feet. I had insoles made for me, but the blisters kept coming back and became infected. My podiatrist cleaned them out and explained to me that it takes longer for wounds to heal for people with diabetes. I went through cast after cast for about 3 months to heal these infected areas, but it finally got so bad that the bone was visible in some areas. At this point, I had the first of many surgeries to come; my toes were amputated to stop the infection from spreading further. Later, I had to have half of my foot amputated; things were better for about a year, but then more areas on my heel became infected.

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Photo courtesy of Melvin Miles



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I had just had a new cast put on to take pressure off of the heel, but at home it felt wrong, as if it was rubbing against my skin. I went back in and they took the cast off of my foot and saw that the infection had spread around my ankle. I was checked into the hospital and they started me on medicines to help clear this up. But by the time the doctor came in to see me the next morning, my foot had turned purple and black – the infection was making its way up my leg. I was taken into surgery that day and had a below-knee amputation done. After this, I was free of infections for the next few years; I was fitted with a prosthetic leg and I thought I was finally on the right path. But even though I was eating the right foods, my blood sugar levels still remained high (250).

My problems started up again when a blister formed on my residual limb; they adjusted my prosthesis and gave me medications to clear up the area. But my leg eventually swelled up until I could not put on my prosthesis and there was an open wound at the end of my residual limb. I went to the emergency care unit, where they informed me that the infection was back. After a week of tests in the hospital, I was told that surgery was needed to remove the infection. I asked if they could delay this for a couple of days so I could talk with my wife about this. The next day, I told her that I wanted to have them amputate above my knee to stop the infection from traveling up the rest of my leg. She agreed with me. I told the

doctors what I had decided on. They tried to explain to me what they wanted to do, but I told them I could not handle any more surgeries or deal with more infections. I felt that if we went above the area, this would stop the infection completely. The doctors reluctantly agreed. Although this did stop the infection, I began to have problems with my other foot a year later. After a series of infections, I had to have half of my other foot amputated.

I am now 54 years old and use a wheelchair full-time. I prefer not to use a prosthesis, hoping this will help me avoid infections and more surgeries. I still battle with controlling my blood sugar and now take insulin (cloudy and clear) in the morning and evening with metformin. In addition to dealing with diabetes, I also suffer from depression, which I also treat with medication. In all, I take nine medications on a daily basis.

Diabetes is a terrible disease to deal with. It is the leading killer among all ages of our people, beating drugs and alcoholism. I hope someday they will find a cure for this disease. I would also like to hear from others who are dealing with this. My e-mail address is navajosouix@msn.com. I am a great listener – I would be interested in helping anyone or forming a support group here in Portland, Oregon. I also would like to give presentations to the young and elders on how diabetes affects your daily life. The more we know and share, the better we can control this disease. ■