



A Guide
to the Portrayal
of **Type 1 diabetes**
in Film + Television

Thank you for sharing the realities of living with Type 1 diabetes (T1D) with your audience. Your work will help educate, clear up misconceptions, increase safety, and raise awareness.

Approximately 1.6 million Americans currently have Type 1 diabetes, with an estimated 65,000 people diagnosed each year. By 2050 approximately 5 million people are expected to be living with T1D. Despite the numbers, it is also one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented conditions out there.

Inaccurate portrayals in film and television fuel common misconceptions like: eating too much sugar or being overweight causes T1D, only children can develop T1D, having diabetes prevents one from participating in high impact sports and physical activities, and those with diabetes cannot have any sweets or sugar. None of these are true.

It is our hope that this guide will provide clarification as to the realities of living with Type 1 diabetes and will empower content creators to accurately represent T1D on screen

WHY DOES ACCURATE PORTRAYAL MATTER?

Accurate portrayal of Type 1 diabetes on screen is one of the greatest tools available to raise awareness among the general public and to clear up potentially damaging misconceptions.

SAFETY: With the best intentions, people make assumptions on how to help people living with Type 1 diabetes based on what they “learned” from film and television. Unfortunately, this can create a dangerous situation for someone with T1D - being given an insulin or glucagon shot at the wrong time can be fatal, while being given a source of sugar when it’s not needed can lead to poor health outcomes.

MENTAL HEALTH: People living with T1D already carry an immense burden. When they hear inaccurate jokes about how they “did it to themselves” by eating too much sugar or being lazy, or are made the punchline of jokes, it can be psychologically damaging and lead serious conditions like diabetes burnout, diabulimia, depression, anxiety, etc.

WHAT IS TYPE 1 DIABETES?

Type 1 diabetes is a chronic, auto-immune condition that occurs when the body's own immune system attacks the insulin-producing beta cells of the pancreas.

This attack leaves the pancreas with little or no ability to produce insulin, the hormone that helps regulate blood sugar. Sugar stays in the blood instead of being converted into fuel for the body, causing serious damage to organ systems while depriving the body of fuel.

People with T1D must inject or pump insulin into their bodies every day to carefully regulate blood sugar and stay alive.

Type 1 diabetes means insulin dependency for life. You can be diagnosed at any age. Even with proper treatment and blood sugar control, devastating complications can happen. The disease requires meticulous planning to avoid life-threatening situations.

Type 1 diabetes is not a lifestyle disease. Nothing could have prevented it. You cannot outgrow it. It is not infectious. It is not caused by sugar, diet, or lack of exercise. It is not curable... yet.

While the cause of T1D is unknown, studies suggest that it results from a genetic predisposition, typically combined with an environmental trigger.

HOW IS TYPE 1 DIABETES DIFFERENT FROM TYPE 2 DIABETES?

Type 1 diabetes and Type 2 diabetes are different diseases (and just two of several types of diabetes) that have to do with how the body manages blood sugar - how food is turned into fuel for the body.

Type 2 diabetes occurs when the body cannot properly use insulin, a hormone that regulates blood sugar. While the exact cause is unknown, genetics and lifestyle factors such as being overweight or inactive can contribute.

People with Type 2 diabetes are often (but not always) diagnosed later in

life and manage their disease using a variety of methods based on their body's specific needs - ranging from diet and exercise, to oral medicines, to insulin therapy via shots or insulin pump.

T2D is a complex disease that varies in its effect on quality of life from person to person. There is no "bad" or "good" type of diabetes; none are easier than the others. All types of diabetes are burdensome.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF UNDIAGNOSED TYPE 1 DIABETES

Everyone should know the warning signs of Type 1 diabetes. T1D onset is easily mistaken for the flu and can quickly become serious or even lethal if left undiagnosed. Your help sharing these warning signs could save lives!

UNQUENCHABLE THIRST

FREQUENT URINATION

UNEXPLAINED BEDWETTING

**UNWANTED OR UNEXPLAINED
WEIGHT LOSS**

LESS ENERGY

FRUITY SMELLING BREATH

BLURRY VISION

STOMACH PAIN

NAUSEA OR VOMITING

LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

RAPID, HEAVY BREATHING

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

BLOOD GLUCOSE LEVEL - also called "blood sugar level" or just "blood sugar". Glucose is a simple sugar and the primary fuel for our body's cells. Glucose is absorbed from food, travels into the bloodstream, is converted by insulin into fuel for the cells, and is stored in the liver as glycogen. Blood glucose level is the amount of glucose in the blood at any one point in time.

HYPOGLYCEMIA - also called "low blood sugar" or just "a low". Low blood sugar is a blood glucose reading lower than normal, often characterized as lower than 70 mg/dL in people with Type 1 diabetes. It is caused by too much insulin or too little sugar in the body. Low blood sugar is treated with sugar - oral glucose, juice, candy, etc. In severe cases, it is treated with glucagon, a rescue medication that comes in injectable and inhalable formulations. Glucagon is not sugar, but a hormone typically created by the pancreas to increase blood sugar levels. If left untreated, even for a short time (hours or even minutes), low blood sugar may result in seizures, unconsciousness and sometimes death.

HYPERGLYCEMIA - also called high blood sugar or just "a high". High blood sugar is a blood glucose reading higher than normal, often characterized as greater than 180mg/dl in people with Type 1 diabetes. This can occur because of too little insulin to accommodate food eaten. If left untreated with insulin for hours or days, hyperglycemia can cause diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA), a life-threatening complication.

INSULIN - a natural hormone made by the pancreas that controls the level of the glucose in the blood. Insulin permits cells to use glucose for energy. Cells cannot utilize glucose without insulin. People with Type 1 diabetes must inject (or infuse with an insulin pump) insulin daily to stay alive. Insulin lowers blood glucose levels, and dosage must be carefully calculated to accommodate specific food, exercise, and other factors.

BLOOD GLUCOSE METER - also called "BGM" "meter" "blood glucose monitor" and sometimes "kit". This tool measures the level of glucose in the bloodstream at any one point in time. A healthy range for people without diabetes is between 80 and 120 mg/dL. Many people with Type 1 diabetes check their blood sugar upwards of 4-10 times per day - before meals, before bed, in the morning, and around exercise are particularly important times. Many people also now wear continuous glucose monitors, a technology tool that delivers a continuous stream of blood glucose data to a smartphone or receiver.

EXAMPLES OF MISREPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

THE BIG BANG THEORY

THE STORY: In a Season 8 episode of the popular television comedy The Big Bang Theory, Penny is recounting a previous job at the Cheesecake Factory, where she successfully convinced a table of "chubsters" to order more dessert. She follows this with "one of them even had an insulin pump!", alluding to the fact that they were so overweight that they had diabetes.

WHAT'S WRONG HERE: In this example diabetes is used as a lazy and inaccurate punchline as it is inaccurate and offensive to suggest that all overweight individuals have diabetes.

STEEL MAGNOLIAS

THE STORY: Possibly the most famous portrayal of diabetes in the media is Julia Roberts in Steel Magnolias (1989). In a memorable scene, her character with Type 1 diabetes experiences crashing low blood sugar while at the beauty parlor. She is later told by a doctor that she should not have children due to her diabetes.

WHAT'S WRONG HERE: This example not only overly simplifies the character's chronic disease, but it more importantly leaves viewers with a takeaway that women with Type 1 diabetes cannot or should not have children, which is medically inaccurate.

A GOOD EXAMPLE OF TYPE 1 DIABETES PORTRAYAL IN THE MEDIA

THE RESIDENT

THE STORY: In season 2's episode 2, "The Prince & The Pauper," we meet a 13-year-old girl named Abby who has Type 1 diabetes and is fighting for her life. According to the script, Abby's mother couldn't pay the \$2,000 per month out-of-pocket cost for her daughter's diabetes supplies, despite working two jobs. Because of this, Abby starts rationing her insulin until she goes into DKA (diabetic ketoacidosis). DKA occurs when the body does not receive enough insulin to break down glucose, so it starts to break down fat as fuel. Ketones are then released into the body.

WHY THEY DID IT RIGHT: Often in television shows and movies we use people with diabetes as a plot device — they need insulin or they're going to die. Here, the writers do the same while also bringing to light insulin rationing - a reality that many individuals living with T1D face when they cannot afford the very medicine necessary to keep them normal and alive. They tell Abby's story accurately and respectfully.

ABOUT BEYOND TYPE 1

Beyond Type 1 is a nonprofit organization changing what it means to live with diabetes. By leveraging the power of social media and technology, Beyond Type 1 empowers people to both live well today and supports a better tomorrow. Through peer support programs, global campaigns, and digital platforms, Beyond Type 1 is uniting the global diabetes community across both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, helping to change what it means to live with chronic illness.

Beyond Type 1 is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization, under charitable ID #47-3336640.

QUESTIONS? WE'RE HAPPY TO HELP!

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