

## HAVE YOU SEEN?

### Learning About Diabetes, Inc.

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The name of this company (Web site: [www.learningaboutdiabetes.org](http://www.learningaboutdiabetes.org)) is as straightforward and inviting as its mission. It is a nonprofit charity that provides free downloads of simply written information about diabetes care for consumers and health care professionals. Their materials are all culturally sensitive, written in English and Spanish, and intended for lower-literacy readers, the elderly, children, or others in need of easy-to-understand information about diabetes care.

If you work with patients or groups of people with these specific needs, please keep on reading, or, even better, rip out this article and put it in a safe place where you can refer to it when planning appointments or programs that require this kind of special attention. You will be so glad you did!

The brainchild of Paul Tracey, a former medical marketer, writer and owner of a medical marketing agency, [www.learningaboutdiabetes.org](http://www.learningaboutdiabetes.org) has been up and running since 2006. Paul explained to me that the idea for the charity stemmed from the problems he encountered while creating diabetes patient education programs for clients of his medical education agency. For legal, marketing and medical reasons, the simply written programs his agency created were frequently distributed to patients at an 8th to 10th grade reading level or even higher. Paul was quite aware that diabetes was disproportionately exploding among the poor and less educated, the elderly and people of Hispanic origins. This prompted him

to focus on creating diabetes care education materials for low-literacy, elderly and minority audiences.

With the expert assistance of volunteer artists, designers, literacy specialists and Spanish translators, Learning About Diabetes, Inc. has created more than 50 individual handouts, 5 booklets, 10 picture stories for both adults and children, and 2 comic books, all written in both English and Spanish. The artwork is so creative and entertaining that the reader is drawn toward the information with only a few words. All materials are meticulously scrutinized by volunteer certified diabetes educators (CDEs), registered dietitians (RDs) and advisory board members to guarantee accuracy and efficacy. Reading levels range from 4th grade in picture stories to 7th grade in booklets, with most other programs written at the 6th grade level or lower. Depending on the topic, developers may come to an immediate consensus on how to develop a program or redraft and test the materials as many as eight times. From start to finish, the process may take from 1 month for a handout to up to 6 months for a comic book or booklet, with the goal being to add one new program (in varying formats) per month.

Let us take a cursory look at what is offered. By far the most extensive format of information is presented as colored handouts. Basic concepts include:

1. *General information about diabetes:* Signs, types and risks.

2. *Healthy eating:* This covers everything from MyPyramid; nutrition facts label reading; deciphering portions; identifying foods high or low in carbohydrates, and having good or bad fats, and hidden fats, sugars, or salt; milk information; to whole grains and fiber.
3. *Blood sugar:* Explains hemoglobin A1C, estimated average glucose, and symptoms and treatment of hypo- and hyperglycemia.
4. *Exercise:* Goals and tips for getting started, walking and leg exercises, sheet for a weekly exercise plan.
5. *Caring for diabetes:* Lists important scheduled tests (3, 6, 12 months), daily reminder list (medications, meal plan, check feet, brush teeth, etc.), identifies diabetes care team professionals.
6. *Medicine:* Explains what insulin is, why it may be needed, how to draw it up and inject it, and differentiates insulin from other diabetes medications.
7. *Saving money:* Presents a list of contact information concerning patient assistance programs for free or low-cost medications as well as some organizations that can help provide diabetes supplies.
8. *Preventing problems:* Preventive measures for at-risk patients, weight management, foot care, addressing high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, smoking cessation, addressing depression, heart health, eyes and oral care, prenatal precautions and stress management.

In addition to the handouts, you will also find five different booklets. You will need Adobe Acrobat Reader to read these booklets, and the link to install this program is provided. All booklets are available in English and

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Spanish and are 9 to 13 pages long. Topics covered are: *What Is Diabetes?*, *Understanding Blood Sugar*, *Exercise and Diabetes*, *Diabetes and Healthy Eating*, *Diabetes and Your Feet*. All are presented in color and are easily downloadable.

Seven impressive picture storybooks (7-20 pages) have been created for the adult low-literacy reader. Can you imagine presenting hyperglycemia in just 17 words? Take a look at how it is done. You will be amazed! Also included are three picture books designed for children: a coloring book for boys and one for girls and a 10-page story about *Blinky*, a mouse who has diabetes. In addition, the Web site provides two comic books about type 2 diabetes that are appropriate for adolescents and adults. Again, everything is free and downloadable.

Has this company overlooked anyone or anything? No, because it even offers customized programs. Its online programs are available at a cost to any nonprofit organization in

any language. The same applies to modifications of any of its programs, if necessary, to integrate them with a currently existing diabetes program, or to meet special needs, such as vision impairment. The Web site also lists 54 organizations that offer information on diabetes self-care. In addition to the most noted ones some uncommon sites also are listed, such as [www.lowvision.com](http://www.lowvision.com) and [www.multilingualdiabetes.org](http://www.multilingualdiabetes.org).

It is remarkable how complex diabetes topics are presented with minimal text in a clear manner. Could you explain about insulin in 55 words? Take a look at their insulin handout to see how they have accomplished this with their novel use of art and design. Here are a few more examples of the adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words:" 27 carefully chosen words explain how to read a food label; 90 words reveal to the reader how to recognize hidden sugars; 97 words (most of them food names) separate the good from the bad fats. We can all appreciate how low-literacy patients would respond positively to nonthreatening printed material with communicative pictures and minimal verbiage.

What is also remarkable is that probably less than half of all currently practicing CDEs and even fewer RDs and others involved in direct diabetes patient care are aware of these free resources. And yet, they are ours for the taking!

Learning About Diabetes, Inc. does not enjoy any sponsorships as yet and seldom receives donations. This nonprofit group is just a simple story of a few dedicated people who saw a need and wanted to help fill it. With limited resources, Paul Tracey and the generous volunteers who donate their time and talents continue their unique online educational service to those segments of the diabetic population that are often forgotten. I hope this article will spur you on to look at [www.learningaboutdiabetes.org](http://www.learningaboutdiabetes.org) and use many of the materials you find there.

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