

LET'S GO TO

Camp

Adult diabetes camps are all about stepping outside your routine, building confidence—and improving your diabetes know-how.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN, M.P.H.
PHOTOS MIKE LAST



A camper takes a quiet moment between activities at a Connected in Motion camp session in Ontario, Canada.

Nick Reed (right), discovered Connected in Motion in 2015.



Nick Reed, PWD type 1, from Belleville, Ontario, was browsing his way through a diabetes expo in 2015 when he happened upon a booth for Connected in Motion (CIM). Drawn in by gorgeous photos of canoes and campfires, he walked up and read the tagline for the adult diabetes camp: “Breathing fresh air into diabetes education.” An adventurous outdoors-lover himself, Reed soon signed up, attending his first CIM camp, called a Slipstream (named after the phenomenon in cycling in which drafting with a group of fellow riders takes less effort than riding alone) at Camp Can-Aqua in Bancroft, Ontario, with 46 other adult campers. Soon, he was hooked—on the hiking and swimming; the new friendships and instant camaraderie; the sharing of information at educational sessions; and the so-bad-you-have-to-laugh dia-saster stories around the campfire, like the camper whose pump mysteriously disappeared while she was showering ... in Africa.

“The sense of community and support you feel when you’re surrounded by other campers is overwhelmingly powerful,” Reed, 37, describes. “There’s no judgment over blood sugar levels or stress about asking someone to wait a minute so you can test. Everyone takes their diabetes treasure trove of information, dumps it out, and shares it with everyone they meet. You realize diabetes is nothing that’s going to hold you back.”

MORE THAN CHILD’S PLAY

According to the Diabetes Education and Camping Association, about 20,000 children with diabetes head off to a diabetes camp every summer. And the benefits—making new D-friends, sharing experiences, learning to manage diabetes, all in a safe, welcoming environment—needn’t end once you turn 18. A number of camps cater to the grown-up set, offering a range of activities and educational experiences to foster community and good health—often capped off with a gooey s’more roasted over a crackling fire, or maybe even some wine

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and cheese (you’re a big kid now!).

Adult diabetes camps and retreats can take many shapes. Some, like CIM and the Washington-based Connect1D, are geared entirely toward PWDs type 1; others, like Lancaster, Pennsylvania-based Diabetes Training Camp, welcome PWDs type 2 into the fold. Some are curated for outdoorsy folks, while others, like Taking Control of Your Diabetes’s (TCOYD) ONE: The Ultimate Conference & Retreat for Adults with Type 1, in San Diego, prioritize cutting-edge educational sessions, with fitness activities

sprinkled in. Camps and retreats usually last a few days to a week, taking place throughout the year in various locations.

Regardless of the Who, What, and Where, they all have one goal in common: to bring likeminded PWDs together for a fun-soaked and memorable learning experience.

FASTER, STRONGER, BETTER

When Chloe Vance, founder of CIM, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 2000 at age 18, she was immediately thrust into the adult world of the disease. She’d never met anyone with her condition, and scary posters on her endocrinologist’s walls warned of blindness and other complications. She felt alone and unconnected.

Eight years later, on a cycling trip in Australia with her boyfriend (now husband), she learned about a nearby group of outdoors- and fitness-loving PWDs called Hypo-Active. Vance reached out and was invited to join them for a 48-hour cycling race. “The opportunity to hang out with other type 1s who were my age, active, and clearly trying to live life to the fullest, was so tempting that I said yes without thinking about it. I’d never even raced before!”

At the race, upon realizing Vance was a newbie, her new friends offered some advice: “They said, ‘If you keep your bike as close to the back tire of our bikes as possible, you’ll cruise in our slipstream.’ They were right; for an hour, she rode at a 20-mph



At Connected in Motion Slipstreams, even sessions on diabetes technology draw smiles and laughs.



During a Connected in Motion Slipstream in Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, the main lodge at Camp Arowhon serves as a gathering space for meals and group activities.

clip without doing all that much work. “It struck me that being in that community of people who got it, who spoke my language, who were also testing their blood sugars, and playing with insulin delivery rates, and swallowing handfuls of jelly beans ... I was in a diabetes slipstream!”

Upon her return, Vance searched all over for the Canadian equivalent of HypoActive, only to come up empty-handed. “But my professional background was in outdoor education, and I had the right contacts. So I went for it, visiting local diabetes clinics to ask clinicians to spread the word to their patients.” In 2009, CIM organized its first Slipstream weekend with 19 campers. A decade later, they’ve hosted more than 30 throughout Canada and the northern U.S.

Anastasia Albanese-O’Neill, Ph.D., ARNP, CDE, assistant professor and director of diabetes education and clinic operations in pediatric endocrinology at the University of Florida in Gainesville, says adult camps allow you to “relax and let your guard down because you’re surrounded by dozens, even hundreds of people who get what you’re going through—because they’re living it too.”

In this way, experiential health education opportunities like D-camp offer critical peer support, meaning campers are leaning on—and learning from—fellow adults with diabetes, rather than just turning to, say a spouse or parent without diabetes. Peer support has been shown to improve diabetes management, including behaviors related to blood glucose monitoring, medication dosing, diet, and exercise; it may also help reduce depression.

For instance, CIM campers report post-camp improvements in HbA1C levels and overall quality of life. And a 2017 *Diabetes & Metabolism Journal* study involving adults ages 50 to 86 with type 2 diabetes who attended a three-day camp found that campers had lower A1C levels—and less variability in their measurements—one year later compared to their pre-camp numbers.

“Diabetes education is woven into everything we do,” says Jen Hanson, PWD type 1, executive director of Connected in Motion. Heading out on a hike? “Camp lets you try things you might not try if you were hiking alone or with friends without diabetes. You’ll have the chance to see what happens when you tweak your snacking, insulin dosing, or exercise intensity, and you can do it with confidence because you’re hiking with experts with hundreds of years of combined diabetes experience. [Even] if you have a worst-case scenario,

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Diabetes Training Camp attendees smile for the camera on a local track.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DIABETES TRAINING CAMP

you’re in the best place to handle it; you’ll have a low snack in your hand before you even realize you’re low.”

Not the outdoorsy type? You can mostly stick with educational sessions, like a talk on the latest and greatest in diabetes tech; or choose laid-back activities, like a yoga and mindfulness session with former college athlete turned Nike influencer, and PWD type 1, Lauren Bongiorno.

“Children with type 1 have opportunities for connection and support,” Albanese-O’Neill notes, “but once you become an adult, those resources kind of dry up.” Camp, she says, is one way to help fill that void. In DiabetesMine’s 2017 Patient Voices Survey, diabetes camp was the top-rated tool for patient education, outranking certified diabetes educators, diabetes coaches, and support groups.



Nick’s mother, Janis Reed (left), tries her hand at canoeing.

PHOTO BY BLAIR RYAN



Leading a get-to-know-you game during a Connected in Motion session.



Brrrr! Campers brave Connected in Motion’s polar bear dip.

(RE)DISCOVER YOURSELF

Matthew Corcoran, M.D., CDE, founded Diabetes Training Camp (DTC) in 2006 out of a desire to complement services offered within the traditional medical system. “We aren’t able to meet the needs of patients with chronic disorders in three visits a year,” says Corcoran, an endocrinologist who has spent his career working with amateur, collegiate, and Olympic athletes with diabetes. “We attract campers of all fitness levels, and we encourage each and every one who comes through to tap into their inner athlete, even if that’s a foreign or uncomfortable concept,” he says.

Run by exercise physiologists, nutritionists, CDEs, certified mental skills coaches, and professional athletic coaches, DTC boasts an impressive 1-to-1 ratio of staff to campers. Weekend warriors and couch potatoes hoping to nail their first 5K mingle with repeat triathletes seeking strategies for more consistent blood sugar while exercising.

“We’re always seeing light bulbs going off throughout our week together: ‘aha!’ moments in campers of all fitness levels,” Corcoran says. Take Anthony Romano, PWD type 2, an avid cyclist who, with help

from DTC, discovered the perfect carb protocol to avoid muscle cramps and fuel his long rides. “They helped me understand that when I get on the bike, I’m no longer a type 2 diabetic,” says the 48-year-old from Robbinsville, New Jersey. “I’m an athlete.”

Meanwhile, a jogging newbie might start to view fitness as something within her reach, and that, Corcoran says, can reshape how she thinks about her diabetes management.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Nick Reed, who discovered Connected in Motion in 2015, has turned camp into a family affair by recruiting his mother, Janis Reed, 67, to attend with him. Initially diagnosed with type 2 in 2005, Janis later learned she has latent autoimmune diabetes in adults (LADA). “Nick said, ‘You’d better come to my camp,’ and I decided I needed to jump on the bandwagon.” Was Janis the oldest camper in attendance? She was. Did it matter? Not one bit.

“I started introducing myself to people and learning about them, and felt instantly welcomed.” Janis tried archery, sunrise yoga, and canoeing and even joined a cookie bake-off. Her Facebook friends list has grown, and she recently met up with a new buddy from camp, a teacher who has lived with diabetes for 30 years. For Janis’ next Slipstream, she’s working to recruit a reluctant, non-outdoorsy friend from her local T1D support group to join her. Speaking of bringing friends, some camps allow campers to invite a friend or loved one along, even if he or she is a “5.5er” (a fond Slipstreamer term for non-PWDs that refers to the perfect blood sugar level, in Canadian measurements).

Nick found new “family” at camp too. “Up until camp, I didn’t have anybody on my speed-dial list who I could call and say, ‘I’m having a really bad sugar day.’ At camp, I found the family I’d been looking for, but didn’t know I needed.” That includes Allison Mitchell (nickname: Badass Adventure Mom), whom he now considers a sister. Though they live hours apart, they text often and hang out occasionally, watching hockey and laughing over inside jokes. One year, while they were celebrating Thanksgiving together, Nick’s blood sugar dropped and Mitchell fed him her homemade apple crisp.

Jody Corcoran, who runs Diabetes Training Camp with her physician husband, explains that this instant-bond phenomenon is common. “People tend to come alone,” she says of DTC, which usually hosts about 30 campers at a time, “but when they leave, they’re leaving their best friends.” Campers stay in touch via social media, alumni gatherings, and fundraising events, like a recent Hard Rock Atlantic City benefit featuring Bret Michaels, the lead singer of the band Poison and a PWD type 1.

Ironically, if you’re craving a break from diabetes, diabetes camp may be just what the endo ordered, offering a sense of community, unwavering empathy, and a been-there-done-that vibe not easily found outside support groups or online chat rooms. Janis Reed can’t wait to return to Connected in Motion this fall. “I’ve already been challenged to take the polar bear dip, so I’m hoping for a balmy September. If not, maybe I should conveniently ‘forget’ my bathing suit.”

Want to go to camp?

DIABETES TRAINING CAMP

Upcoming camps include a summer adult camp for T1 and T2; and an exclusive T2 boot camp in March in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Average cost: \$2,700 to \$3,200, depending on the venue. This includes one-on-one coaching, training sessions, lectures and workshops, lodging, meals, and some snacks. Scholarships are available. (diabetestrainingcamp.com)

CONNECTED IN MOTION

Upcoming events for PWDs T1 include a Northeastern Slipstream (Winslow, Maine) in June; Colorado Slipstream (near Denver) in August; Ontario Slipstream (Algonquin Park) in September; and SoCal Slipstream (Lake Hughes, California) in October.

Average cost: \$300 to \$350 for a 3-day program, including shared accommodation (usually bunk-bed style) and all meals and snacks. (connectedinmotion.ca)

CONNECT1D

Upcoming events for PWDs T1 include a 2-day retreat in June at the Clearwater Resort in Suquamish, Washington.

Average cost: \$250 for a 2-day program, plus lodging. The cost includes meals, workshops, outdoor activities, and access to resort facilities. (connect1d.org)

TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR DIABETES (TCOYD)

Upcoming events for PWDs T1 include a 3-day retreat in August at the Paradise Point Resort in San Diego, as well as 1-day conferences all over the country throughout 2019.

Average cost: \$150 for the 3-day retreat and \$30 for each 1-day conference, plus lodging. All meals, workshops, and exhibit-fair access are included. Financial assistance is available too. (tcoyd.org)