

Dealing with Diabetes

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 26 November 2010 14:46 -



Gothenburg boy learning new way of life.

Christopher Atteberry could see the tiny houses and miniature cars through the rear windows of the helicopter.

It was the first time since the 10-year-old was a baby that he'd flown.

"We even flew over Grandma and Grandpa's house, didn't we Mommy?" the youngster asked.

"We might have," said Christopher's mother Mandy Holsten.

The flight was sort of exciting for the fourth-grader who says his favorite subjects in Claudine Kennicutt's class are science and social studies.

But it wasn't so much fun for his mom, who sat in the cockpit of the medical helicopter as it transported Christopher from Gothenburg Memorial Hospital to Children's Hospital in Omaha.

"We knew it wasn't immediately life threatening," Mandy said. "But we also knew we needed to get to a specialist as quickly as possible."

After a week of complaining about a stomachache that wouldn't go away, Mandy took Christopher to the doctor on Monday, Nov. 1.

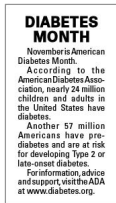
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He was tired, lethargic and found himself in the bathroom more than usual.

“The doctor originally thought it might be appendicitis,” Mandy said.



When she took Christopher back to the doctor’s office the next day, she said everything that was elevated in his blood tests on Monday showed numbers that had doubled on Tuesday.

But the tell-tale sign that put everyone on alert was a blood glucose level over 500.

Christopher was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and flown to Omaha where he spent two days in intensive care and another two days in observation.

Mandy said the diagnosis came as a shock. Diabetes is not something that runs in the family.

Type 1 diabetes is usually diagnosed in children and young adults. Roughly one in every 400 to 600 U.S. children and adolescents has this disease.

According to the American Diabetes Association, having Type 1 diabetes means the body does not produce insulin, a hormone necessary to convert sugar, starches and other foods into energy for daily life.

Treatment most often involves insulin therapy.

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That's where Christopher's new testing kit with the football field cover and a box of syringes come into play.

Christopher pricks his finger and tests his blood nine times a day. And that's on a good day, his mom said.

The number of pokes has been as many as 20 in a day.

If the digital testing device shows a glucose count between 70 and 180, Christopher is doing well.

Lower than that and he needs a quick sugar boost. Higher and he needs to bring it down with more insulin.

Right now, Christopher gets four shots a day—one at breakfast, one at lunch and two at supper.

While Christopher has learned to give himself shots, most of the time someone else delivers the shot in his arm or leg.

"I see it as my job as a parent to do whatever it takes to keep him well," said step-dad Jeff Holsten. "Right now, that means giving him shots."

Insulin injections don't fix everything, though.

Diet is a big part of keeping a diabetic healthy.

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Christopher said he's had to give up large amounts of pizza, change from regular Kool-Aid to sugar-free and learn to count carbohydrates.

And since Mandy is the manager at McDonald's Restaurant, Christopher uses a pocket carb counting book to determine whether he can still eat his favorite McChicken sandwich.

"It only has 40 carbs," he said.

That means one sandwich is OK but too much could make Christopher sick.

"Life is just not as simple anymore," Mandy said.

And the past couple of weeks have been especially difficult because of what Christopher calls "the honeymoon period."

Jeff explained that Christopher's pancreas is still producing some insulin but not consistently. He said it could take a couple weeks or more than a month to level out.

In the meantime, the glucose numbers zig and zag up and down.

Even through the night, Jeff and Mandy wake Christopher to test his glucose. If it dips too low, he has to get up and eat a sugary snack.

"We'll just be really glad when we get it all on a more even keel," Mandy said.

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Christopher and his parents admit they still have a lot to learn about diabetes.

So do the students in Christopher's class at school, the teachers and his friends.

"As far as anyone knows, he's the only child in Gothenburg with diabetes," Mandy said. "So we're learning together."

Mandy and Jeff have visited Kennicutt's classroom and talked with school nurse Annie Cornwell.

"The kids have a lot of questions," Mandy said. "We don't want them to be scared of this at all."

At school, Christopher has a buddy. Adam Groenke is not only a best friend but he's also his watchdog.

"He goes everywhere with me," Christopher said.

That's so whether Christopher is eating his peanut butter and jelly sandwich at lunch or playing at recess, there's always someone to keep an eye on him.

"We're just going to work really hard to get the numbers under control so he can go back to just being a kid," Mandy said.