

Riding out the storms

Kathy Kirwan has had type 1 diabetes for 20 years and has recently returned from sailing 3,000 miles across the Atlantic from the Caribbean to Crosshaven, writes **Sheila O’Kelly**

Kathy Kirwan developed type 1 diabetes in 1992 as she was entering her second year in college when she was intent on fulfilling her lifetime dream of studying Physical Education at the University of Limerick. The first question she asked was: “Will I be able to climb Mount Everest?” When the nurse said “Yes”, Kathy could breathe easily again.

Following her diagnosis, Kathy continued her studies and graduated with flying colours in 1995.

While Kathy never headed for Everest she has taken on the equally challenging sport of transatlantic sailing and has completed four transatlantic sailing trips so far. And it was in the middle of the Atlantic on the way back from one of these crossings that her then boyfriend, proposed to her.

“I couldn’t decline!” said Kathy.

Rheumatoid arthritis

Kathy has not only learnt to live with her diabetes, but in 2005 she developed severe rheumatoid arthritis (RA). She spent two tough years working through a variety of treatments for her RA and eventually it went into remission for two years. However, it reappeared in 2009 and she decided to take a career break from Schull Community College where she was teaching PE and Geography.

In the last 12 months Kathy has slowly



come off her RA medication and built up her strength. She is now back cycling and works part time in an adventure centre and is studying Art at college.

“Having just completed a tough transatlantic crossing, I know I’m back!,” says Kathy.

In 2001, Kathy studied for her Yacht Masters and availed of a career break to spend two years working on yachts as a deck hand and crewing in the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

“I have completed four Atlantic crossings, in both directions. Throughout all the adventures my diabetes was always a huge consideration,” says Kathy.

“Through the 20 years since my diagnosis, my main goal has been to work with my diabetes,” says Kathy.

On one of these trips Kathy’s sugars kept running high and even though she was testing for ketones, she was still a bit concerned. So she phoned her consultant in Ireland.

“I rang him from the satellite phone on the boat and listed out my readings and he gave me advice! I had an infection but

it cleared up in a few days,” says Kathy.

Insulin pump

Kathy started using an insulin pump three years ago.

“It has empowered me with much greater flexibility, particularly regarding exercise. Being so involved in a wide variety of unpredictable activities on water and land, the pump has allowed me greater freedom and flexibility with greater blood glucose control.

“I had always found exercising that I was eating, eating, to go and exercise. Eating when you don’t want to eat and then feeling uncomfortable because you had eaten before exercise,” says Kathy.

When someone uses a pump they get a steady dose, called the ‘basal’ rate, of insulin at a rate that suits their health and metabolism. This can be adjusted when needed. In addition someone on an insulin pump can give themselves an extra one-off ‘bolus’ dose of insulin when needed.

Exercise carbohydrates

Kathy finds that when she is exercising,

LIFE STORY

taking 15 grams of carbohydrates every 30-45 minutes works well for her. When she is exercising intensively on a regular basis, she finds she can drop her 'basal' insulin level by 40-50%.

"At the moment I am training for the South Coast Adventure Race. It's on in Skibbereen and there is an 8km forest hill run; 26km bike ride; and a 3km kayak course. As a result I hardly need to take any extra insulin for what I am eating. I eat and then hit the bike straight away. The levels vary depending on my activity," says Kathy.

In contrast to the days when Kathy is training intensively, she has days when she is at Art College and gets almost no exercise. Kathy finds that the pump is invaluable for managing this lifestyle.

"In Art College I am standing around doing virtually no movement. I find that is where the pump has become invaluable to me in getting my insulin dose correct," says Kathy.

Kathy says she gets a spin off from her intensive exercise days, which means she can reduce her basal rate.

"I dropped my basal rate last night by 50% and I woke up this morning perfect. This is the spin-off from the exercise – it lasts for 24 hours or more. Your metabolism speeds up," says Kathy.

Trip supplies

Kathy says the pump makes her transatlantic trips much easier, but she still always takes a supply of insulin pens with her too. In fact she will take these even if she is just going away for the weekend.

For transatlantic trips if she is going for one month, she takes two months' supplies, which includes blood glucose test sticks, ketone test sticks and Hypo Gel

"I have had to replace my pump twice due to malfunction," says Kathy.

Kathy also carries an up-to-date copy of her medical history.

"I have learnt going through so many health practitioners over the years, you always have to tell your story to a new one. It can be quite emotional, especially because you only go to the doctor when you don't feel good.

"Even if I'm going to see the consultant, I always have a few notes written down because you are vulnerable enough going in to see people," says Kathy.

On her sailing trips, Kathy says there is always at least one crew member who is squeamish about needles, but there is also always one she can work with who would help her out in an emergency.

"I show them how to use the pen fills and go down through the procedure with them.

"Storage is not a problem on the boat. There is a fridge if I need it, somewhere like the Caribbean. I'd usually put one set in the fridge and keep one set out, just in case the fridge froze or anything happened to it. And I'd keep a thermometer in the fridge to make sure it was at the right temperature," says Kathy.

The crew works two hours on and six hours off, which could disrupt blood sugars, but Kathy said having the pump makes this so much easier.

She often brings McCambridge's brown bread and oatcakes to boost her carbohydrate intake because they are easy to measure. The chef on board is cooking something different every day, and it could be local foodstuffs, which make it harder to count carbohydrates. So Kathy finds the bread and oatcakes help get over this.

"At night you're eating when you not used to. You use a lot of correction doses to correct your sugars," says Kathy.

A trip from the Caribbean to the Azores in North Africa can take 14 days, and then it is another week or so up to Spain or nine days to Ireland.

3-4 metre seas

"On the last transatlantic I got caught. The day we left Grenada it rained and it didn't stop. We had 3-4 metre seas and up to 40 knots of wind. It was really heavy. So I was lashing through test sticks.

"I rang ahead to a guy who deals with boats in the Azores and told him the type of test sticks I was using. He checked it out and I could walk into a chemist there and get the strips free no bother if I had a prescription from the doctor. So I went to the doctor in Horta and he gave me a

prescription. Wow! It was just so good to know that sometimes you don't have to go through a brick wall to get pieces like that," says Kathy.

HbA1C

Generally, Kathy manages to keep her HbA1C at 7.5-8. Ironically during last winter's snow when she couldn't get out to do her normal exercise, her blood sugars were perfect because her days were so regular.

"It is such a Catch 22 trying to marry exercise [with diabetes]. If I was out sailing, for example, one day you might go out and it is a nice beautiful calm day and everything goes swimmingly, and then you might capsize. All of a sudden you are using all this energy and your adrenaline goes into action.

"If you did a 40-minute stroll every day it would be much easier to control, but the type of exercise I do – on the bike, running, sailing or walking – it's always very different," says Kathy.

"However, I have been in training fairly regularly for the last 2-3 months and you do slot into a pattern after a while. It becomes much easier. It takes diligence like managing diabetes does in general," says Kathy.

Support group

Last year, Kathy joined a diabetes support group organised by the Southern office of Diabetes Ireland.

"The support from the group has been invaluable. The group started in September 2010 as a pilot group and it was facilitated by two counsellors for the first year. From that, the group started attending a peer-to-peer support group of 10 people. Somebody chairs the meeting and generally we bring up a topic for discussion or there is a guest speaker," says Kathy.

The group, organised by Diabetes Ireland South Development Officer, Pauline Lynch, meets in the Diabetes Ireland office in Cork. It is open to everyone.

"It is good just to connect and touch base with somebody. I have diabetes 20 years now and I'd say for at least 10-12 years I didn't know anyone with diabetes."