

Teen takes TV

challenge in her stride

Seventeen-year-old Ciara Duffy, who has type 1 diabetes, is not only a competitive swimmer at national level, but recently took part in RTÉ's 'Ultimate Street Challenge', writes **Sheila O'Kelly**

Ciara Duffy, who was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was seven years old, recently won a silver medal in the Senior 100 metres backstroke at the Leinster Schools Championships. This qualified her to take part in the National Irish Schools Championships.

But that is not the only challenge that this determined teen has put herself up for. Last summer, Ciara spotted an item on the Diabetes Ireland website page about RTÉ looking for 16-year-olds to take part in a Dublin Ultimate Street Challenge programme. She filled in the forms and went through the selection process and was thrilled when she made it through.

10 teens compete

The programme put 10 teenagers in competition with each other through various unusual fitness challenges and eliminated them gradually. Ciara came third overall and was the last girl to be eliminated.

The programme was shot during the summer holidays and broadcast in the autumn. Many of the physical challenges were completely new to Ciara and she had to deal with things like the adrenalin rush sending her blood glucose up and then crashing down afterwards.

"I had glucagon kits. I had insulin. I had needles in case my pump failed. I had to show people how to use the glucagon. Some of the girls were quite averse, had quite an aversion to blood. They were kind

of 'no, no I don't like blood, keep it away from me, keep it away from me'. It was quite funny. It was great," said Ciara.

Ciara thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience though she did find it a bit strange when walking down the hallways in school and she heard people saying: "God she's on the telly!".

Sister also has type 1

Last November, just after the series had been broadcast, Ciara's then six-year-old sister Niamh was also diagnosed with type 1 diabetes – the day before Ciara was 10 years' diagnosed. Ciara also has a younger brother Eoin who is 16.

While Ciara's parents, Aisling and Ciaran, have always encouraged her to take control of her diabetes herself as much as possible, they can usually tell if she is going low or high.

"If I'm high I'm quite lethargic. I don't want to get up. I don't want to move around. If I'm low, it's quite awkward to explain, but if I'm low I start to lose focus on what's going on. My mam could tell me to do something two or three times and I just won't register what she's saying," said Ciara.

Ciara's current A1c (long-term blood glucose level) is 6.4 and she is quite happy with that.

Swim training

Ciara trains eight and a half hours a week and swims with the Mullingar Jets.

She uses a waterproof Animas 20/20 insulin pump, however, she removes it when she is in the water.

"I have managed to get my insulin to work so well with me that I can take it off for up to two hours and not experience any change in my blood; and be perfectly fine not having ketones when I get out of the water," said Ciara.

Ciara has used trial and error to see what works best for her when training. She downloads her meter results to a computer once a week to review her blood levels. And she tweaks her insulin levels to work as well as possible with her blood glucose.

Ciara attends Crumlin Children's Hospital and they have helped her learn how to get the best from the insulin pump.

When Ciara is in training she reduces her basal level insulin (the continuous insulin level that goes from the pump directly into the body) by 80-90% for an hour before training.

"I just eat normally as I usually would. After training I reconnect the pump and reduce my basal level by 70%. I eat up to 40 grams of carbs without bolusing [giving any extra boost of insulin] to make sure that my blood levels come back up. Then I eat as normal without bolusing, or I eat as normal with bolus," said Ciara.

Two hours after training, Ciara has to watch out for a sudden dip in insulin levels. She treats that as she normally would and keeps an eye on her blood glucose.

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bring my blood kit with me and set my alarm to go off in 20 minutes and check again and if it's all right I'll go back to sleep. If it's still low I'll do the same again," said Ciara.

Olympic dreams

Ciara's ultimate sporting dream is to make it to the Olympics. While after she leaves school she would like to become a biotechnical engineer so that she could go on to help develop insulin pumps and work towards a cure for diabetes.

Ciara and her family are shortly heading off to Albuquerque in New Mexico for her father's job and she plans to continue her swimming training there. Ciara will go to High School there and do the US university entrance exams, the SATs. She may end up going to college there.

Ciara's advice to any young person with diabetes is: "No matter what anyone says, no matter what doctors say, no matter what people in your class say, never, never let it hold you back.

"Your dreams haven't changed. You're still the same person. You will always be the same person. Diabetes may affect your life but never let the 'what ifs' – 'what if I didn't have it,' 'what if this happens' – so what.

"If it happens it happens, but you'll never know unless you jump in and try it," said Ciara.

Diabetes opens doors

Ciara says that diabetes has opened many doors to her.

"Last October I went over to England and I spoke at the Children with Diabetes Conference. It was amazing.

"Kids will be kids. They'll always try to blend in with their friends. They'll always try the sweets. Never, ever let anyone else tell you who you should be. Diabetes will always affect your life. If you try to deny it it's going to be interesting.

"They all think oh no, no diabetes isn't there, diabetes isn't there. I'll be the same as everyone else. But no you won't. No one's the same as everyone else anyway you work it.

"So be yourself," said Ciara.

Managing competitions

On actual competition day, Ciara usually swims about three or four events so she checks her bloods as often as she can. She reduces her basal insulin by about 70% on the day of the event and then uses a bolus dose of insulin to correct if her blood glucose levels go up. She eats as she needs to if her blood glucose goes down.

After the event is over, Ciara's blood glucose usually goes up. This is because they are sprint type swims of 50, 100 and 200 metres and the adrenalin of this type of exercise often sends someone's blood glucose up.

Twenty-four hours after a competition Ciara often finds that her blood glucose is lower than normal for longer periods of time.

"But I just treat it as I usually would and continue about my day," said Ciara.

Nighttime hypos

Luckily, if Ciara has a nocturnal hypo (her blood glucose falls too low while asleep) she usually wakes up.

"It's quite a dreamlike state. It's quite strange and it's quite weird, but I can go down the stairs, do my bloods, check my bloods, eat and come back upstairs. I'll