

# Fighting fit and in control



Kate Flynn, 17, tells  
**Sheila O'Kelly** about  
living with diabetes

#### At what age did you develop diabetes?

I was eight, just gone it. I remember the date and everything and the day. It was the 14th of May 1999.

#### What led up to your diagnosis?

Well, sickness really. Everybody in the family got this viral infection and it cleared up in everyone except me. It continued on for a while and I was very sick. And I was thirsty and going to the bathroom a lot. There was one occasion when I was in Tullamore, I needed to go to the bathroom every half an hour. It was such a pain for mammy and for everyone else.

Eventually we went in and got tests done. I can even remember what I had to eat and drink. I had an ordinary coke, a Kit-Kat chunky and a chocolate muffin before I went up to the doctor. She did a blood sugar on me and as I was heading out the door she said: "Oh wait Mrs Flynn come back", and she said "you are going to have to stay with us".

Mammy was glad it was diabetes. She was a nurse and she thought it could have been something like leukaemia because of all the sickness and huge amount of weight loss in

such a short period of time. So when we figured it out we were delighted.

I had a great time in the hospital ward and all the nurses were lovely. I liked being pampered and I managed to bribe mammy into getting me the big thing at the time which was a Game Boy colour. She said well "If you start taking your injections on your own then I will get you something nice". So I got it. From day one, I took the injections myself instead of having her to do it.

#### How did you feel about the diagnosis?

I didn't really know much about it apart from the fact that I had to take injections and watch my diet. I suppose it was a bit of a pain but I kind of got used to it and it was the normal routine. Eventually, I just forgot what life was like before injections.

#### How did family, friends and school react?

In school, it was the normal reaction, people don't really like needles. So you got this "ooh and ah" and "does that not hurt?" and all these questions. You were the centre of attention so it wasn't too bad.

Mammy had gone over to the school and given a little talk and said: "You know she is not any different. She doesn't have horns growing out of her head or a tail or anything like that. She just has to take injections and watch her diet and take care of her blood sugars". It was fine from then on – people understood. It was very helpful that my mother was a nurse. She knew the routine.

#### What hospital did you attend?

I went to Portiuncla in Ballinasloe when I was diagnosed. Later, I transferred up to the Mater diabetes unit because my control was very bad. I was doing everything right and mammy and daddy were watching me. I was doing my blood sugars right. I wasn't messing around, I was taking my injections, and my diet was grand, but I couldn't get it under control. Nothing seemed to work. Eventually, after some time the doctor recommended that I transferred up to the Mater, which I have been attending for three or four years.

#### Is an adolescent unit a good idea?

Yes, definitely. When I moved to the adolescent unit they changed the insulin I was on from two injections to four. I didn't mind because it helped control my blood sugars. My A1C was very bad for many years and the worry then of course was of problems in later years.

When I came up here, we were thrilled that things started to settle down a bit. They were still a little erratic, but then in time I was put on the pump. I think the pump is fantastic. It is a completely different way of life and it is amazing doing blood sugars and seeing fives and sixes coming up on the screen. Instead of having 14 or 20, I was amazed. Even in the first week of the pump you could see the difference.

It took some time to learn all the different functions and to know that if you were going to be exercising the different functions you'd use then. In time, it was great.

It has brought my A1C down. In February when I was put on the pump my A1C was 12, then the next month it had come down by two to 10, then it came down to nine, and then eight and seven which is what it is at the minute. The ideal thing would be to get it down to six.

If I am sick I can take a bolus and it doesn't stay high all day. That used to be a real pain because it would make you feel twice as bad. Overall now I feel fantastic. I used to be tired

all the time and thirsty but I don't have those problems any more.

#### How often do you attend the Mater clinic?

It is about three times a year – sometimes more often depending on how my blood sugars are going and the basal rate that I am on. I can always pick up the phone and get it fixed over the phone. Before, on the injections, sometimes it would get so bad, I would have to go into hospital.

It is better here because they know about the pump and down the Midlands they don't really know much about the pump yet.

#### Did you ever feel diabetes restricted you?

I was diagnosed two weeks before my first Holy Communion. When it came to after the Communion they had sweets all over the table which was terrible. It was hard getting used to the diet because it was only the first two weeks on the injections and the diet. They had buns and everything. I couldn't help myself I was grabbing anything I could and mammy was racing around after me.

It was difficult in the beginning, but I suppose because I was younger it was harder for me to understand why I had to do this and why I was different. Now that I'm older I can understand a lot better and the fact that bad blood sugars lead to complications. I'm much more strict.

It is hard in the long term, especially going through adolescence and that.

Before I was on the pump going out with friends could be hard. I have a snack and meal routine. If I'd already eaten, and they'd go to Macdonald's or something, I would be sitting there feeling a bit left out because I couldn't do that.

Your social life is slightly affected. The pump has made it much better. You can go out, you don't have to eat at six o'clock, you don't have to have a snack. If you are not well you don't have to force yourself to eat because your blood sugars have dropped, you can adjust your insulin which is fantastic. It is such a better way of life.

#### How have schools reacted to the diabetes?

In primary school we brought up the insulin and had it in their fridge. We brought the teachers up-to-date about what would happen if my blood sugars were low. If I were to have a fit they were told what the procedure was. Unfor-

tunately, they weren't insured or something to give it to me themselves, so they had to have contact numbers of people. There was my mum and my dad, and my older sister and brother, and friends of the family, that knew how to do it. So they would have to have been phoned.

Now, in secondary school, my teachers know about it, but they would not know about it in detail. The schools here have just amalgamated and I have different teachers now. This means I will have to get them up-to-date. All some of them really know is that if I'm low I have two take Lucozade and go out of the class. They don't really need to know much more, but the fantastic thing is that my principal has diabetes. So she knows all about it which is a huge advantage.

#### What developments would you like to see?

At camp we were discussing the ideal pump – we love water activities so maybe having the pump waterproof would be ideal. Maybe in time the monitor on it would give you a bolus [extra dose of insulin] of its own accord when you went high.

#### How useful do you find the Federation?

I am in the youth group which is good because you get to meet up and talk to people who have diabetes. Personally, I don't like talking about it to my friends who don't have diabetes. They don't understand it well because they don't have the personal experience.

Whereas when I meet friends I have made through the Federation, they understand it and I can talk to them about it. You would say such and such a thing happened to me and they would say "Oh yeah, that happened to me before" and how they dealt with it. It is very helpful. And you get to have a bit of fun as well – we go bowling or whatever. I think it is fantastic.

The adolescent camps are about twice a year and hopefully they will increase. In between you can communicate with each other by e-mail, Bebo, and get numbers and texting.

I never made it to the SweetPea camps because I was in hospital a lot of the time when I was younger. I couldn't control my diabetes and my immune system was very low. Constantly sick, tummy bugs, and I had ketoacidosis. It was horrible, but I have grown out of that now.

Thank God the sugars are settled and it is two years since my last hospital admission now, which is great.