

Seek out support and ask for advice



Pictured above are sisters Ciara Gilgunn (left) and Niamh Shevlin (right) with Ciara's daughter Caoimhe in the middle. Ciara and Niamh were both diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when they were young, and Caoimhe was diagnosed aged 6. Ciara's and Niamh's main message: Go to support groups, speak to other parents and ask for advice if you or your child is diagnosed with diabetes

Having a child diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes can be overwhelming, something Kathleen McDaid is all too familiar with. The mother of four from Letterkenny in Donegal saw two of her daughters develop the condition within three months of each other in the early 1990s, and two years ago, her granddaughter was also diagnosed.

However, Kathleen and her daughters insist that Type 1 diabetes has never held them back from doing the things they want.

During the summer of 1991, Kathleen's daughter, Ciara, who was 13 at the time, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

"I had not really heard of diabetes before and I didn't know anyone that had it," she recalls.

Ciara was brought to the family GP because she felt generally unwell and was very thirsty. She was sent to Letterkenny General Hospital where the diagnosis was confirmed.

Just a few months later, while on a family outing, Kathleen noticed that her eight-year-old daughter, Niamh, was unusually thirsty and she thought to herself, 'here we go again'.

Niamh was subsequently diagnosed with the condition.

And two years ago, Ciara's daughter, Caoimhe, who was just six at the time,

was also diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

Kathleen says that having two daughters with the condition was "difficult enough, but the girls did their own injections from the beginning, and the condition never stopped them from doing anything".

Ciara, who now lives in Leixlip in Co Kildare, had just completed first year in secondary school, but that summer in 1991, she was so thirsty, she was "stuck at the fridge drinking loads". She was also going to the toilet a lot and was very tired.

However, after her diagnosis, she "tried to keep it normal".

"I was big into sport and went back

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to it within a couple of weeks. I never let diabetes hold me back," she says.

She recalls that her family was generally healthy anyway, so no major changes had to be made, for example, to the foods they were eating. However, she does admit that there were a few rebellious times during her teenage years, when she might not have tested herself as often as she was meant to.

"Sometimes I would get annoyed and think, 'why can't I eat that?', but generally I just got on with it and always took my insulin," Ciara says.

Three months after her own diagnosis, her eight-year-old sister was also diagnosed.

Niamh, who lives in Letterkenny, remembers the day she was diagnosed as it was during the Halloween holidays, but she does not really remember her stay in hospital.

Like Ciara, she also recalls that since the family was already healthy, "nothing drastic changed".

"I do remember if there was a party, I had to check if I could eat certain things, and overall, there were good days and bad days, but it never held us back," she recalls.

She says it helped that her big sister had the condition, and even now, they

will often ask what the other thinks about anything diabetes related.

Coincidentally, her two godchildren also have Type 1 diabetes, including Ciara's daughter, Caoimhe.

Caoimhe, who is now eight, was six when she was diagnosed. Ciara says that she noticed that her daughter had lost weight. One night she was looking for water because she was so thirsty "and it just clicked".

"I tested her blood glucose levels and they were high, so I got her to wash her hands, in case she had sugar on them. But when I tested her again, the levels were even higher, so I rang the doctor and I was told to bring her straight into Crumlin," she explains.

Ciara admits that she was "absolutely devastated" about the diagnosis, "because I knew what she was going to be up against".

"I was very upset, but we explained it to her and she accepted it. I told her we'll be fine, and we make sure she is never left out of anything. She just gets on with it and she has an SNA in school to help her with it," Ciara says.

Both Ciara and Niamh believe that support is key when a diagnosis occurs, something that was thin on the ground when they were younger, and still is in

many areas today.

"Back then, our parents joined a Diabetes Ireland support group, but there were very few of these groups around. And we never received any kind of counselling, which I think is a pity," Ciara says.

She is currently a member of a parent support group in Leixlip that meets up every few months and she is "on Messenger to new parents all the time".

"I would advise anyone whose child has been diagnosed to go to support groups and speak to other parents. Ask for advice," she says.

Niamh agrees that having good support is key and she would like to see more counselling services available for both those with the condition and their families. Both Ciara and Niamh also agree that the increase in diabetes-related technology has been a huge help.

While there is a lot to learn with this new technology, it allows more flexibility.

"There is so much technology now, such as insulin pumps and CGM. I use a Freestyle Libre and wouldn't be without it. Now I can keep an eye on my blood glucose levels when I sleep. Back when we were children, you couldn't do this. I don't know how mum and dad did it," Niamh adds.



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Diabetes Ireland?**

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fundraiser, Tel: 01 842 8188 or Email: info@diabetes.ie**