

[Free Diabetes Self-Management Counseling at the Hillside Health Center](#)

Roughly 1 in 17 adults in Mendocino County are treated for the life-long disease of diabetes. Because of the high reports of child obesity in Mendocino County, this number is likely to increase very soon. This disease has profound effects on the daily lives of those diagnosed and is the leading cause of adult blindness, amputation, and kidney disease. It is also a major cause of heart disease and stroke and, in 2011, was the seventh leading cause of death in the United States.

At the Hillside Health Center in Ukiah, providers and support staff are taking important steps and piloting new programs to help patients faced with diabetes live the long and healthy life they deserve. This past November, two Community HealthCorps (AmeriCorps) service members at the clinic, Max Rusek and Tom Fuchs (myself), began working with providers to develop a counseling program to extend clinic services for people with diabetes in the county.

The new Diabetes Self-Management Counseling program is a free, one-on-one service. Following primary care visits, providers offer patients the opportunity to meet with one of the HealthCorps service members to discuss diabetes. Over the course of a meeting, patients learn about the effects of diabetes on the body and how this can be best controlled with things like diet, exercise, stress management, and regular logging of blood glucose levels. Patients are receive informative pamphlets and booklets from the American Diabetes Association to supplement this education. These materials are available in both English and Spanish.

Patients have had a positive response to the educational aspects of the program. One patient at the clinic stated “Diabetic counseling is definitely needed here. I’d recommend you guys to anyone, at least to talk to.”

During a session, counselors ask patients to describe their daily habits for managing diabetes and the circumstances in their lives that assist or inhibit their success. The HealthCorps counselors consider this information so that they may provide feedback and advice within the constraints of each person’s life.

This information is also very important during a session when the HealthCorps counselor works with the patient to set goals for improved disease management. These goals vary from person to person, but as often as possible are concretely quantified. For example, a patient may decide to do aerobic exercises three days a week for 30 minutes, or another patient may decide to limit their soda intake to once every two weeks. If the patient is not confident about being able to meet their goals, as determined by a numeric rating scale, then these goals are reconsidered to better match the circumstances of their life or their motivation for change.

At the end of an initial meeting, the counselors ask patients if they would like to have follow-up appointments. Counselors use these repeat encounters to review the patients’ success with the goals, to provide further opportunities for education, and to

continue improving their daily living with diabetes. At times, improvement can mean adjustments in food shopping habits, at other times improvement can mean keeping a food diary or better logs of blood glucose recordings. To respect patients' time and the common problems of access to transportation, these repeat encounters, like the initial ones, are scheduled to take place following primary care visits as often as possible.

Each patient is at a different place regarding his or her daily disease management and patients have varied motivations. At times, something like an extended explanation about starch in food is the most important thing we can provide a patient. Other times, patients are merely happy to have another person on their team, thinking alongside them, helping them climb towards the healthiest life they can live.

One enthusiastic patient at the clinic, who has lived with Type I diabetes for many years, spoke about her desire to one day raise a family and expressed her thankfulness others are helping her do her best to live with diabetes. She has been making amazing adjustments in her life, from restricting herself to a "cave-man" diet to starting a support group for other people like her. She hopes to set an example for all those around her, struggling with diabetes.

"For a long time, I wasn't taking care of myself. I'm in pain and my eye sight is going. I finally realized I want to live. I want to get married and go on family vacations. I want to see my sister get married. I realized how important it is that I make these changes. This is such a big part of my life. It's just nice to have recognition."

Though the counseling service at the clinic is young, primary care providers are happy with its progress. Currently, goals of the program are to work towards optimize reporting methods so that providers remain informed about each patient's health goals and education. In the future, success of the program will be assessed qualitatively and statistically, by investigating improvements in average blood glucose measurements and patient satisfaction surveys. For now, we are happy to have the service available to patients. In the words of Physician Assistant and Associate Medical Director, Justin Ebert, "everyone could use a little extra TLC."