

# The Importance of Referring to Peer Support



## Who is a good candidate for peer support?

Anyone living with or caring for someone with diabetes looking for validation, acceptance and camaraderie is a great candidate for peer support. People affected by diabetes deserve to be made aware of peer support options and opportunities to engage. The value of sharing lived experience with others cannot be understated. The need for and appropriate sources of peer support may change over time as individuals' lived experiences, diabetes status and diabetes care evolve—and new sources and ways to connect emerge.

## Take a moment to reflect:

*Could you benefit from expanding your own knowledge about the variety of available peer support resources?*

The National Standards for Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support call for providing ongoing support throughout the lifespan. Healthcare providers are encouraged to regularly assess an individual's sources of and need for support.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the positive impact of peer support on improving clinical and behavioral diabetes outcomes and individual quality of life. Healthcare professionals can provide guidance on finding and engaging in a variety of reliable peer support resources.

### Step 1: Understand When to Refer

Opportunities to assess an individual's need for and interest in peer support can happen at any time, but a good guide is the established four critical times to refer for diabetes self-management education and support. These times are:

- At diagnosis.
- Annually and/or when not meeting treatment targets.
- When complicating factors develop.
- When transitions in life and care occur. This can include aging, change in living situation or schedule, health insurance changes, or even life milestones such as marriage, divorce, becoming a parent, moving, etc.

#### Additional considerations on when to refer:

Current events such as the covid-19 pandemic.

These times can alter the need and readiness for peer support, as well as the priority a person places on it and their capacity to engage.

Diagnosis age or duration of diabetes.

Those newly diagnosed with diabetes or a diabetes-related complication, or undergoing changes in their ability to perform self-care, may feel particularly overwhelmed and isolated. Knowing there is a community of people willing to support them—when they are ready—may be helpful.

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## Here are a few questions to help start the conversation:

What would you like to share about what's happening in your life right now?

Who are the most important people in your life? Do you feel comfortable talking to them about your diabetes?

Who are the most helpful people to you in your efforts to manage your diabetes? What do they do that is helpful?

How does diabetes make your day-to-day life more challenging? Do you think having additional support would help? What would that help look like?

What examples do you have of other people in your life living with diabetes?

What have you heard about peer support and interacting with other people with diabetes?

In learning more about connecting with people living with diabetes, what might you find helpful or would you be open to trying?

## Step 2: Identify Where to Refer

With the expansion of technology over the last 10-15 years peer support opportunities have evolved both online and in person. Healthcare professionals cannot and should not be expected to monitor every peer support opportunity but can recommend some that have been vetted.

In-person peer support continues to be relevant and available. Traditional diabetes education centers have provided face-to-face options for decades, often in the form of facilitated support groups. More are also being offered via online platforms. These groups allow participants to share in a supportive environment tips, frustrations and wisdom learned from living with diabetes. In addition, some organizations facilitate community support groups or meet-ups like DiabetesSisters or Connected in Motion.

It has been widely noted in the literature that the most helpful ongoing support options may change over time as a person lives with diabetes. Resources an individual finds useful today may not be useful in five or ten years. Regular follow-up and an individualized approach allow the provider to determine the most useful resources to share at a given time.

A good place to start is the ADCES website where you can find free resources for people with diabetes, prediabetes and other chronic conditions. Learn more about peer support and access handouts at [DiabetesEducator.org/PeerSupport](https://DiabetesEducator.org/PeerSupport).

## Step 3: Make a Referral

In the routine assessment of a person's social support, consider a conversation about support in general, and integrating the power and value of peer support into care.

Start by asking basic, open-ended questions (see side bar) to gauge the person's interest in and readiness for peer support. This can help open the conversation, prioritize where to take it, and meet the person where they are. They may not be ready to hear about a specific website or program. Based on their interest, introducing the idea of connecting with others helps build awareness and trust.

Another way to start the conversation may be for healthcare providers to briefly describe peer support communities and then ask an open-ended question to solicit individuals' thoughts about this concept.

For more information visit [DiabetesEducator.org/PeerSupportforHCP](https://DiabetesEducator.org/PeerSupportforHCP).