

Transport Topics

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Opinion: Diabetes Manageable for Trucking

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Our country's transportation infrastructure delivers everything our economy needs to stay healthy, similar to the blood that runs through our veins to deliver oxygen and nutrients. But diabetes, a disease of the blood, is wreaking havoc on the professional drivers transporting goods to all corners of our country and threatening the transportation infrastructure on which we depend.

The prevalence of diabetes is 50% higher within the trucking industry than it is in the general population, according to the National Institutes of Health. Factors that put truck drivers at a heightened risk for developing diabetes include high stress, lack of physical activity, irregular sleep schedule and poor food choices.

The nomadic lifestyle inherent in this vital industry naturally lends itself to several health problems, including diabetes. It's not a problem that has developed overnight. Over the past 30 years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports diabetes diagnosis rates have increased 150% in men and 100% in women. There are 1.7 million new diabetes diagnoses each year, according to the American Diabetes Association.

While a diabetes diagnosis for those in other industries may mean an increase in hospital visits and sick days resulting from their diabetes-related health problems, it can be a career-ending diagnosis for commercial drivers. A federal rule enacted in 1970 grounded commercial truck drivers who use insulin to manage their diabetes.

Fortunately, thanks to updated laws and rules, many drivers with diabetes now can continue their careers as long as they properly manage their disease. In 2005, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration announced a Diabetes Exemption Program that permits drivers with diabetes to continue working as long as they meet requirements of 57 separate screenings. However, securing the waiver can take up to 180 days, which obviously is a problem for drivers with no other source of income.

More changes could be on the horizon. Congress is considering legislation that would make securing a diabetes exemption quicker, but a vote still is needed.

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DIABETES MANAGEABLE FOR TRUCKING, CONTINUED

Trying to manage any chronic illness comes with a set of challenges, but the consequences can be especially dire for our professional drivers with diabetes. If blood sugar levels are not properly managed, they risk blurred vision or even losing consciousness behind the wheel of a 40-ton truck.

Managing this incurable and progressive disease, however, often means overhauling a person's lifestyle. And that's all the more difficult for those whose "home" is on the road — where burgers and fries lure drivers at nearly every exit and getting access to physical activity is tough, if not impossible.

The solution to keeping truck drivers with diabetes on the road is to include the support of companies specialized in helping those with diabetes change — and sustain — lifestyle habits.

These companies will pair drivers with professional health coaches, who are trained and skilled to help people living with diabetes engage with this disease and become involved in actively managing it. Most people are overwhelmed by the initial diagnosis, don't appreciate the seriousness of this disease and fail to take care of themselves properly.

This will lead to the irregular blood sugar levels that cause complications such as fatigue, loss of eyesight, foot neuropathy and kidney disease, to name a few. But with the assistance of a certified professional health coach, people living with diabetes now have access to the tools not only to check their sugar levels but also to receive personalized guidance and support on the kinds of foods to eat and how to incorporate exercise into their lifestyles.

Several studies, including one in the American Journal of Health Promotion, have proved that those living with diabetes are far more likely to take care of themselves properly if they have someone, such as a personal health coach, helping to keep them informed and accountable.

The health coach befriends and develops a relationship with each person, does not prescribe or demand changes but instead finds out what each person is struggling with and works to develop an individual plan that is manageable and achievable.

Health coaches have regular sessions to check in with their clients on their progress and to identify and help with the challenges and lapses that are sure to occur. Unlike doctors or nurses who work only certain hours, health coaches can schedule to be available at times that fit into the driver's schedule.

Working with our cadre of professional drivers who suffer from diabetes to ensure their health and safety on the road is critical to sustaining our transportation infrastructure. With American Trucking Associations estimating a shortage of 35,000 to 40,000 truck drivers, it is essential to provide today's drivers who live with diabetes the necessary and helpful tools to remain healthy and on the road.

There is no cure for diabetes. It requires lifelong care and attention. Without a support system, managing the disease can feel and often is impossible. Although diabetes never goes

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away, it is possible to be “in remission” by keeping it under control, without the assistance of medication. Reaching that goal takes time and dedication, which is challenging when your life is on the road. The good news is that professional health coaches can offer truck drivers a service that not only improves their quality of life but also saves their jobs. TrueLifeCare, based in Nashville, Tennessee, makes meaningful, positive differences in the lives of people with diabetes and reduces associated health-care costs for their employers.

Read more at: <http://www.tnews.com/articles/basetemplate.aspx?storyid=39934>

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