

Appendix B

Peer Support

Peer support links people living with a chronic condition, such as diabetes, so they can share their experiences to support and encourage each other. It can be an effective supplement to the knowledge, expertise, and support offered by health professionals and consumer organizations.

What Is Peer Support?

Peer support takes many forms, including one-to-one mentoring, support groups, and online forums. Peer support is best defined by what it does, not by how it is delivered or who is doing it. Peer support has four key functions:¹

- › assistance with self-management—practical tips, problem solving, and resourcefulness, based on experience of living with the condition
- › social and emotional support—empathic listening, encouragement, and coping with negative emotions
- › linkages to formal healthcare or community resources—help with navigating the health system
- › and ongoing support reflecting the long-term nature of the condition—encouraging and engaging with proactive follow-up.

The Effect of Peer Support on A1C

There is strong evidence from meta-analyses that peer support (for type 1 and type 2 diabetes) produces small but statistically significant improvements in A1C.²⁻⁴ One meta-analysis showed a clinically significant pooled mean reduction of 0.57%.² It is important to note that trials of peer support vary considerably in their designs, populations, and interventions, so the mean A1C reduction across all studies may not be the best indicator of effectiveness. We need to consider who benefits most and in which circumstances (see below).

The Effect of Peer Support on Other Outcomes

A1C may not be the most important indicator of effectiveness. Peer support can improve many outcomes important to a person with diabetes:⁵⁻⁹

- › behavioral (e.g., self-monitoring, medication-taking, healthy eating, and physical activity)
- › psychosocial (e.g., diabetes knowledge, self-efficacy, emotional well-being, and diabetes distress)
- › and health (e.g., blood glucose, blood pressure, lipids, body fat, and body mass index).

Outcomes and experiences of peer support cannot always be quantified easily or meaningfully. A review of qualitative studies found that people with chronic conditions use online communities (e.g., forums, live chats) for many purposes.¹⁰ For example:

- › to find illness-related social support outside their own networks (so as not to “burden” family and friends with detailed discussions)
- › to normalize their illness identities (e.g., through sharing and responding to each others’ stories)
- › to offer and receive experiential knowledge (e.g., problem-solving how to put their health professional’s recommendations into practice in daily life)
- › and to find a collective voice for advocacy.

The Diabetes Online Community (DOC) is one such example of people with diabetes, caregivers, health professionals, and associations engaging online to find diabetes-related support and information. A recent scoping review suggests that DOCs are highly beneficial.¹¹ However, it is an emerging area of research, and further research is needed to identify the consequences of the DOC for those who engage with it.¹¹

Is Peer Support Cost-Effective?

Few studies have evaluated diabetes peer support in terms of its cost-effectiveness. Peer support models, programs, and interventions vary, as do the healthcare contexts in which they are implemented. This makes it difficult to extrapolate the findings of one study to other peer support initiatives. Structured peer support interventions in primary care settings may be either cost-neutral or cost-saving, depending on the outcome of interest, with >80% probability of such peer support interventions being cost-effective in the long term.¹²⁻¹⁴

Ultimately, the various benefits of peer support described above may lead to reduced healthcare utilization and reduced healthcare costs.

Who Benefits Most from Peer Support?

The three meta-analyses (focused on A1C as the outcome)²⁻⁴ found that the benefits of peer support are most evident for people who:

- › have a baseline A1C above recommended target range
- › are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background

- › have greater social disadvantage
- › and are less engaged with their diabetes self-management.

The benefits are also most evident when there is:

- › at least one peer support contact per month
- › and structured peer supervision is provided for the peer leaders.

Similarly, a review of 47 studies assessing peer support for groups identified as “hardly reached” found that 84% of the studies (in which a control group was included) reported significant between-group differences favoring peer support.¹⁵ The review also noted that the benefits of peer support were greater among people with higher levels of disadvantage (e.g., lower health literacy or lower education) and disengagement (e.g., less optimal self-management and medication taking).

How Can People with Diabetes Access Peer Support?

Table B.1 offers some examples of, and contact details

TABLE B.1 Diabetes Peer Support Initiatives in the U.S.

| Organization/Initiative | Program Details | Contact |
|---|---|--|
| American Diabetes Association | The American Diabetes Association offers a number of opportunities for peer support via local state offices, diabetes camps, online forums, and more. | www.diabetes.org/community (800) DIABETES |
| Online Forums and Peer Support | Online outlets and forums offer opportunities for people living with diabetes to interact and provide support from anywhere. The Association of Diabetes Care and Education Specialists has created a downloadable handout collecting a number of online options, available on their peer support page. | www.diabeteseducator.org/peersupport |
| Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF) Peer Support Programs | JDRF administers face-to-face support groups and one-to-one peer support for families and individuals living with type 1 diabetes. To find out more, call your local branch (offices in most states) or visit the JDRF website. | (800) 533-CURE www.jdrf.org |
| Diabetes Online Community (DOC) | DOC offers online peer support through Tweetchats (online discussion via Twitter) for adults with diabetes (all types). | To find out more, on Twitter, search for #DOC |

for, diabetes peer support initiatives.

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