

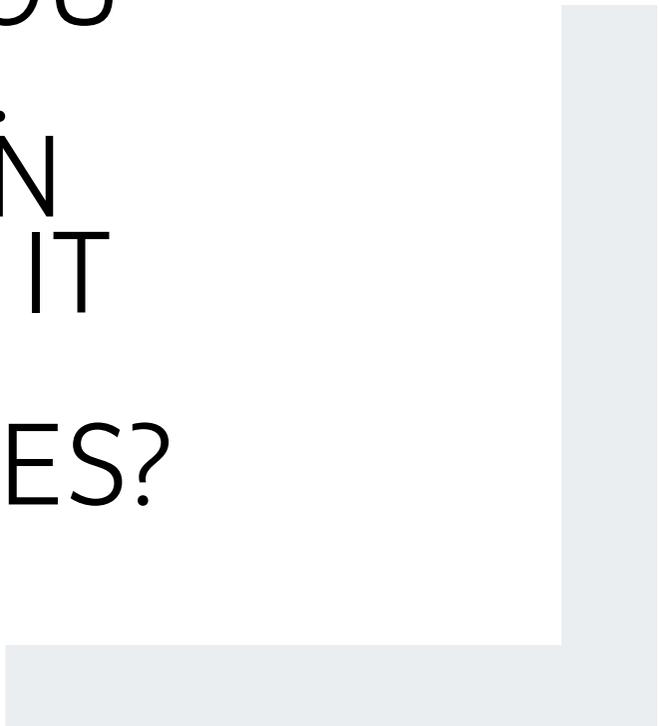


Despite having faced discrimination early in his career, Adam Roth, a special agent with the Department of Commerce, says diabetes doesn't have to hold you back.



CAREER COUNSELING

YOU'RE
READY TO
BE ALL
THAT YOU
CAN BE.
BUT CAN
YOU DO IT
WITH
DIABETES?



BY TRACEY NEITHERCOTT
Photograph by Matthew Furman

IN SCHOOL, THEY LIKE TO SAY YOU CAN BE ANYTHING.

A ballet dancer. A firefighter. President of the United States. The sky's the limit, they say, and most kids believe it. But doubt scratches at the back of some kids' minds: Can I be a firefighter? Can I fight crime? Will my diabetes dictate which job I can take?

Not too long ago, the unfortunate answer to the last question would have been yes. People with diabetes were shut out of jobs because companies feared that workplace episodes of low blood glucose would put their employees in danger and that caring for diabetes would disrupt their work. But that misguided view is being challenged by advocacy efforts and new laws and guidelines. Diabetes self-care can be accommodated reasonably in most work situations.

Legally Speaking

Before you enter the job market, it's important to know your rights as a person with diabetes. There's no law that requires you to disclose your diabetes, and employers aren't allowed to ask about your medical background before offering you a job.

That said, some job offers (such as for police officers) may hinge on your ability to pass a medical evaluation, which takes place after a formal offer has been made. A job offer may be rescinded based on exam results, but only if your health will prevent you from doing your job or if it may put you or your coworkers at risk. Who conducts this evaluation? It depends. Some employers have their own medical staff while others will accept reports from your doctor.

CAN YOU DO IT?
MANY CAREERS ARE WIDE OPEN TO PEOPLE WITH DIABETES, BUT OTHERS HAVE A WAY TO GO.

ASTRONAUT: YES. NASA evaluates all applicants on a case-by-case basis.

ATHLETE: YES. Some athletes with diabetes include Chicago Bears quarterback Jay Cutler, NASCAR driver Miguel Paludo, LPGA golfer Michelle McGann, former Olympic swimmer Gary Hall, Jr., marathoner Missy Foy, and Tampa Bay Rays outfielder Sam Fuld.

BALLET DANCER: YES. Zippora Karz was a world-class ballerina with type 1 diabetes and now teaches.

CHEF: YES. Art Smith, Paula Deen, Sam Talbot, and Charles Mattocks are all successful chefs with diabetes.



Most jobs don't require a medical evaluation, so whether or not you talk about your diabetes is up to you. But staying mum on the topic can put you in a tricky place. If your employer doesn't know about your diabetes, you may have a hard time proving discrimination based on the condition.

Though there are state laws regarding workplace discrimination and others specifically covering government employees, the most significant legislation for people with diabetes is the Americans with Disabilities Act, which protects most people from being denied jobs or fired from a position because of their diabetes. (Although many people with diabetes do not think of themselves as being at all disabled, diabetes is considered a disability under the law.) The law also requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to enable people with diabetes to do the job.

Believing Stereotypes

Employment limitations on people with diabetes are mostly based on outdated beliefs about the disease. "Most of these restrictions were made at a time when diabetes was managed in a much more crude way than we do today," says John Griffin, Jr., a Victoria, Texas, attorney and former chair of the American Diabetes Association's board of directors, who has won many workplace discrimination cases involving people with diabetes. "No one had a way of knowing what their blood sugar was at any time. Meters weren't



“EACH PERSON WITH DIABETES IS DIFFERENT AND HOW THEY MANAGE THEIR DIABETES IS DIFFERENT.”

Duane Johnson
Certified Scuba Instructor

DIVING WITH DIABETES

A Jamaican vacation—more specifically, a snorkeling trip—changed Duane Johnson’s life. In one day he was hooked. Back home in Chicago, Johnson decided to learn to scuba dive.

“One of the first forms you have to fill out is a medical form,” he says. “One of the first questions is, Are you a diabetic?”

His answer: yes. Diagnosed at 24, Johnson had a couple of years of type 1 diabetes under his belt when he decided to dive. “I was still getting used to diabetes, and my blood sugar wasn’t in that great of control,” he says. “So when I asked my doctor, he originally said no, not until I got my blood sugars down.”

Johnson, now 39, took the order seriously. He changed his diet and amped up his exercise in order to lower his blood glucose. Six months and a four-day scuba class later, Johnson was a certified diver. He’s since become a diving instructor, though he hit one snag: The first training agency he applied to refused to accept him because of his diabetes.

Diving with diabetes is not without its challenges: Most diabetes devices don’t work so far underwater and haven’t been tested under such high pressure. Though Johnson wears an insulin pump regularly, he takes it off while diving.

He tests his blood glucose five to six times from wake-up until just before he dives. Though he may be disconnected from an insulin source for varying periods of time while diving, Johnson says his blood

glucose doesn’t skyrocket often.* Lifting heavy scuba gear and swimming both help keep his level steady.

He’s never been low during a dive, he says, thanks in part to his focus on prevention. “If my blood sugars are trending down [before a dive] and I’m doing a short, shallow dive, I might eat a banana,” he says. “If I’m doing a longer dive, I’ll have a granola bar.” He has briefed his dive buddies on hypoglycemia and what to do in case he needs glucagon.

Johnson says his family and regular diving pals have been supportive because they trust his approach to diving safety. “Over the years, I’ve had a couple people express concern,” he says. “The problems I’ve experienced are more in the diving community.”

Thankfully, that community has become more accepting of other scuba divers with diabetes—as it should be, says Johnson. “Each person with diabetes is different and how they manage their diabetes is different,” he says.

**Typically, it’s recommended to be disconnected from a pump for no more than an hour because the body needs background insulin around the clock.*

as accessible as they are now. Insulins weren't as short acting and precise as they are now."

Yet for some occupations diabetes is still considered a major risk, mostly because of the chance of low blood glucose. "The biggest obstacle to employment is having had a serious hypoglycemic episode in the one to two years preceding employment," says Daniel Lorber, MD, FACP, CDE, a New York City endocrinologist and vice chairman of the American Diabetes Association's Advocacy Committee. Some careers (such as law enforcement) may require you to have had no more than one or two severe lows—in which you might need glucagon, have a seizure, become unconscious, or go into a coma—during the few years before applying.

Such rules can complicate your diabetes care. "You may need to loosen control a bit and raise the A1C in order to prevent hypoglycemia," says Lorber. "It [puts you] between a rock and a hard place." That is, you may be forced to choose between strict blood glucose control, which may lead to hypoglycemia, or raising your A1C by half a percentage point to win the job.

"The difference between a 7 and 7.5 percent A1C is small, but it may help reduce hypoglycemia risk," Lorber says. But not everyone's comfortable with loosening their control. "It's hard because they've been hammered about complications of [high blood glucose]."

And it's not just people taking insulin who concern employers. Because some type 2 pills, such as sulfonylureas, can cause low blood glucose, people on oral medication often face restrictions or discrimination, too. The good news: "That is becoming less and less a wall to knock down because (a) sulfonylureas are not used as much and (b) the prejudice against diabetes is mostly against insulin or the misunderstanding of what an A1C is," Griffin says.



COMMERCIAL PILOT: NOT YET. People with diabetes are able to pilot personal aircraft but are still banned from flying with passengers. The American Diabetes Association is fighting the ban.

FBI AGENT: YES. Prospective agents undergo a medical evaluation, during which those with diabetes are assessed on their ability to successfully manage their diabetes.

FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER: YES. The State Department requires all applicants to undergo a medical evaluation, during which people with diabetes are assessed on their ability to successfully manage their diabetes.

MILITARY PERSONNEL: NOT YET. All branches of the military—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard—bar anyone with diabetes from joining, though people diagnosed while already in service are not always discharged.

PERSONAL TRAINER: YES. Ginger Vieira, Cliff Scherb, and Simon Bennett are among trainers with diabetes.

POLICE OFFICER: YES. Prospective officers undergo a medical evaluation, during which those with diabetes are assessed on their ability to successfully manage their diabetes.



Though many professions are catching up to the times and adjusting their policies regarding the hiring of people with diabetes, certain careers remain walled off. People with diabetes are able to pilot private airplanes, but they are prevented from operating commercial airlines. (Interestingly, Boeing has test pilots with type 1 who fly 747s without issue—a point that bolsters the ADA's case for equality for pilots with diabetes.)

But the most difficult occupation for people with diabetes to enter is the military, which doesn't operate under typical federal employment laws that make blanket bans illegal. People with diabetes cannot join any branch of the military. (If you're diagnosed with diabetes after you've been accepted by the military, though, you possibly may avoid discharge, depending on your medical history, your job, and other factors.) "The question should be: Can they be a good soldier?" says Griffin. "We believe there is a subset of young men and women with diabetes who would be excellent soldiers. They should not be denied that privilege because of their diabetes."

Opened Doorways

Despite the fact that blanket bans still exist for some careers, the job market on a whole is accepting. Even in occupations where everyone with diabetes was once banned, practices have changed in recent years, thanks in part to advocacy efforts by the ADA.

Instead of being denied outright, would-be cops, FBI agents, and Foreign Service officers undergo a medical evaluation that verifies diabetes control. "It's only a matter of time before the CIA joins the FBI and the State Department in thinking people with diabetes should be evaluated on how well they manage their diabetes," says Griffin.

The National Fire Protection Association has also dropped its blanket ban on firefighters with diabetes. Applicants



Adam Roth
Special Agent,
Department of
Commerce

“I’VE RUN INTO PEOPLE BEFORE WHO ASK ME, ‘CAN I BE A POLICE OFFICER OR AN FBI AGENT?’ YOU CAN DO IT, AND THERE’S NOTHING THAT IS GOING TO HOLD YOU BACK OR SLOW YOU DOWN.”

TO SERVE AND PROTECT

Adam Roth is no stranger to law enforcement. In his 11-year career, he’s been a small-town police officer, an officer with the U.S. Pentagon Police, a member of security details for dignitaries, including the secretaries of state and commerce, and a special agent with the Department of Commerce, his current job.

When Roth decided on a law enforcement career, he knew his type 1 diabetes would play a role in the application process. “There were places 10 years ago that wouldn’t hire type 1 diabetics,” says Roth, now 35. “I remember there were some [police] departments that I looked at that had blanket bans on people with diabetes.”

Applying for his first job, as a cop in a New Jersey beach town, Roth was cautious about revealing his diabetes. “I really tried to downplay it,” he says. “I did tell them, but only when I had to. I figured, why give them a chance to find something wrong?”

Roth was hired without issue, but he still worried when applying for a police position with the Pentagon. The Department of Defense, which would employ him, conducted medical evaluations using the same medical team as the military. “I was pretty concerned about that because the military excludes diabetics,” he says. The job required physicals twice yearly and his doctor’s sign-off, but aside from that, he wasn’t held to different standards than other officers.

But Roth ran into trouble when he pursued a reservist job with the Coast Guard while working for the Pentagon Police. He’d done combat and medical training through the military, so it wasn’t a stretch

to believe he’d be accepted. Yet Roth was refused because of his diabetes.

“I can be a special agent with the Department of Homeland Security, but I can’t be a special agent with the Coast Guard, [which is] under the Department of Homeland Security,” he says. He fought the ruling, but the Coast Guard wouldn’t budge.

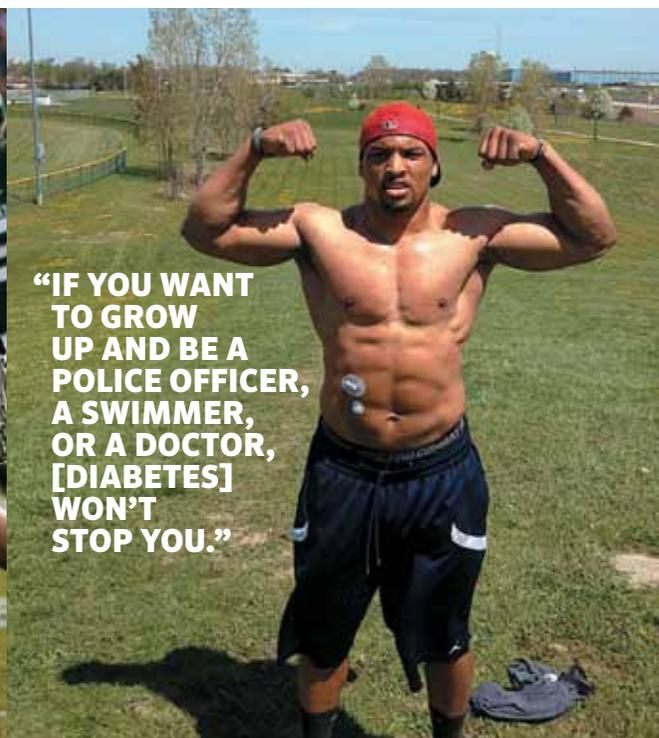
Roth was luckier in his fight against the Alexandria (Va.) Volunteer Fire Department. Having completed emergency medical training while working at the Pentagon, Roth aimed to join as an emergency medical technician but was stopped by a department ban. Roth appealed, eventually won the position, and served as an EMT for a year.

If Roth’s career proves anything, it’s that people with diabetes can hold any number of jobs—even if people tell them it’s impossible. “Don’t let anything hold you back,” he says. “I’ve run into people before who ask me, ‘Can I be a police officer or an FBI agent?’ You can do it, and there’s nothing that is going to hold you back or slow you down.”

Matthew Furman



Brandon Denson
Pro Football Player



“IF YOU WANT TO GROW UP AND BE A POLICE OFFICER, A SWIMMER, OR A DOCTOR, [DIABETES] WON’T STOP YOU.”

GOING PRO

Brandon Denson is used to fighting for the job he wants. As a high school senior who’d just been diagnosed with diabetes, Denson didn’t have any offers to play football in college. He applied to a handful of schools with the hope that he’d at least get to play for fun. Instead, he walked on to the football team at Michigan State as a freshman and earned a full scholarship to play linebacker for the next three years of college (shown in the photo above as No. 34).

Doubts about his ability to go pro vanished the first time he stepped onto the field. “At that first game, I thought, ‘I want to do this as a career,’” he says. Denson fulfilled his wish in 2011 when he was drafted to play for a professional team in Canada. This season, after first signing with the Cleveland Gladiators arena football team, Denson moved back to Canadian football with the Montreal Alouettes.

A large part of his success: good diabetes care. “If I don’t take care of myself, they’re not going to let me play sports,” he says. So Denson sticks to a healthy diet and works out regularly, fastidiously monitoring how eating and exercise affect his blood glucose. He also takes care to make sure his insulin pump is secure beneath his pads because speeding down the field, tackling, and getting blocked are all part of the game.

But most important to realizing his dreams? Motivation. “I’m pretty determined, so when I say I’m going to do something, I’m going to get it done,” he says.

It’s a sentiment he’s shared with others with diabetes since his college ball days, when a 13-year-old boy with diabetes wrote to him

about being inspired by his play. “I never really spoke to anybody about my diabetes until that letter,” he says of the note, which still hangs in his locker. “It opened my eyes that I need to tell people, especially kids, that it’s OK if you have diabetes.”

Denson still talks to the teen, who’s now a senior in high school, and encourages his football aspirations. He’s spoken with parents of children with diabetes as well as kids of all ages about going after their dreams. “We all have different stories,” he says. “If you want to grow up and be a police officer, a swimmer, or a doctor, [diabetes] won’t stop you.”

now go through a similar medical evaluation as police officers, though regulations require them to have an A1C under 8 percent, in most cases, in order to be medically qualified.

Commercial truck driving is another occupation in which the thinking has changed about employees with diabetes. In the past, those who treated their diabetes with insulin were automatically banned from interstate truck driving. Now the federal Diabetes Exemption Program allows people with diabetes to apply for the right to be interstate truck drivers by releasing health information related to their diabetes. (Still, the process is rigorous—you must be on insulin for one to two months before applying—and approval can take a half a year or more.) Many states have their own waiver programs that let people with diabetes who take insulin drive commercial vehicles within the state, though obtaining a waiver can take months.

Even NASA, which has had stringent requirements for its astronauts, is more accepting. “Our stance has relaxed over time as well,” says James Locke, MD, MS, a NASA flight surgeon at the Johnson Space Center’s Flight Medicine Clinic. “Medical science has improved, and the ability to keep [people] healthy has improved.” Astronaut applicants are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and people with diabetes aren’t automatically turned away. Instead, Locke and his team consider a person’s blood glucose control, frequency of hypoglycemia, and any complications—from diabetes or otherwise—he or she may have.

However, there have been no astronauts with diabetes in space, and Locke says a few issues still exist. For instance, because there are no refrigerators in spacecraft, it’s unclear whether insulin could be stored for long periods of time. And because the



REALITY TV STAR:

YES. Nat Strand, MD, won *The Amazing Race* with her diabetes gear in tow; it all had to fit in one backpack.

SCHOOL BUS DRIVER:

YES, though school bus driver licenses are regulated by the state, so some states may still have restrictions.

SCUBA DIVING

INSTRUCTOR: YES. In the past, people with diabetes were banned from this profession, but those restrictions have been lifted.

SUPREME COURT

JUSTICE: YES. Sonia Sotomayor was appointed in 2009 and has lived with type 1 diabetes since childhood (see p. 50).

TRUCK DRIVER: YES.

Many states allow people with diabetes to drive commercial vehicles within the state. Through the federal Diabetes Exemption Program, they can be interstate drivers as well. However, the process is long and complicated and still maintains certain requirements in order for a person with diabetes to be exempt.

United States works with international partners, other countries may be hesitant to allow someone with diabetes in space, especially if there is more of a stigma surrounding diabetes in another nation. Of course, that shouldn’t deter you from applying. “We really want to encourage people with medical conditions to work through them,” Locke says.

Looking to the Future

In school, they like to say that you can be anything you want to be as long as you work hard enough.

They’re right.

Just ask Anna Balogh, James Allman-Gulino, and Shane Siegel, who challenged the State Department when diabetes barred them from becoming Foreign Service officers. Ask the two men who fought UPS to keep their jobs or the factory worker who went up against a giant corporation to prove his type 2 diabetes didn’t affect his job performance.

“Well-motivated young men and women with insulin-treated diabetes are opening doors every day,” says Griffin. “If you ask them, they’ll say, ‘I didn’t want my children or my younger brothers or sisters to be barred where I have been.’ Is it worth it? Yes.”

And the ADA is actively fighting for equal rights for people with diabetes, regardless of the job. “Evolution is sometimes slow, and the path to civil rights for people with diabetes is one that has some rocks in the road,” says Griffin. That said, great strides have been made in recent years, and the fight will continue until people with diabetes aren’t banned outright from any job.

“What we need to do is say anybody with diabetes should be able to do any job they are qualified to do,” says Lorber. “In my opinion, there are no jobs people with diabetes can’t do.” ▲

More

The American Diabetes Association is committed to making sure every workplace is a fair one for people with diabetes. If you have questions about your rights or treatment you feel is unfair, call 1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383).