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Carbs under control

Camp teaches young patients independence

By Erin Thompson The Daily Item

WINFIELD — Parents with a child who has Type 1 diabetes sometimes find it difficult to let go of the important responsibility to constantly check insulin levels.

Just ask Doreen Giordani, of Sunbury.

Her daughter, Lauren, was diagnosed at age 7.

“For a new parent, it’s a lot to take in, a lot to learn,” she said.

If low blood sugar goes untreated, it can lead to disorientation, seizures and even coma.

But there is hope.

For the last five years, Lauren, now 14, has been attending Setebaid Services camp for kids ages 8 to 18 who have Type 1 diabetes. This has helped her learn to control her condition and take better care of herself.

“We learn about diabetes in our cabin and get a carb sheet,” so they know how much insulin to take, said Lauren.

Type 1 diabetes is a lifelong disease that occurs when the pancreas does not produce enough insulin to properly control blood sugar levels.

By the time Lauren started attending camp, she already had diabetes for a couple years, “but mom still helped.”

Letting go

And going to the camp gave mom the piece of mind she needed to relinquish these responsibilities to her daughter.

“Kids tend to forget to test,” said Doreen, who heard about the program from another parent at Lauren’s school. “This way, everybody does it at the same time.”

Setebaid Services camps are a good way to help children with diabetes become more independent.

“From my experience, most parents say they would not let their kids go to another camp. At least to start,” said Mark Moyer, executive director of Setebaid Services, a Winfield-based organization that runs three week-long camp programs including the Harrisburg Diabetes Youth Camp and Camp Setebaid at Camp Victory in Millville and Camp Setebaid at Camp Swantra in Bethel, as well as a weekend program for families, in Danville.

Camp Setebaid offers activities that any other camp would offer such as rock climbing, swimming and canoeing.

Lauren’s favorites are archery, creek stumping and arts and crafts.

“The thing to remember is that it’s a normal camp, but everyone just happens to have diabetes,” said Moyer.

Its goal is to educate the campers, the counselors and community members.

Staff volunteers

Last year, Setebaid Services camps had 150 volunteers, which included doctors, nurses and college students who were looking to enter in the health field. The staff normally averages one staff member for each three campers.

For the most part, doctors let campers control their own insulin levels because “that’s how they learn,” said Moyer, but they will assist children who have need help, or have never given themselves insulin shots.

By the time camp is over, virtually all campers are able to control their own insulin.

“Kids see other kids their age (giving themselves injections) and think ‘I can do that, too,’ ” said Moyer.

While Lauren describes her first year at camp as “scary,” because she wasn’t sure she would be able to handle her insulin on her own, she is looking forward to going back to camp this year because it has helped her connect with other who have her condition.

It is estimated that one in 600 children have Type 1 diabetes, making up 5 to 10 percent of all diagnosed cases of diabetes in the United States. When it comes to attending public school, there is typically only one student who has the condition.

That’s why volunteering to help in the program can be beneficial to prospective health professionals as well as seasoned school nurses.

“School nurses deal with so many other things that this may not be a high priority,” said Moyer, adding that asthma is much more common in young people.

“Nurses who work with us typically feel better about going back into school” because they get more hands on experience, he said.

Metabolic controls

Type 1 diabetes it is often mistaken for Type 2, which can be brought on by being overweight and lack of physical exercise.

“If people see me eating a donut, they look at me like ‘should you be eating that?’” said Lauren, who attends Sunbury Christian Academy.

“It’s a metabolic condition,” said Moyer. “There’s no way you can prevent it.”

Most people with Type 1 diabetes are diagnosed at a young age, when their bodies are no longer capable of producing insulin.

“We teach kids they can do anything,” he said. “Type 1 diabetes is not restrictive. It’s a lifestyle.”

People with Type 1 diabetes “can eat anything anyone else can eat, they just have to adjust their insulin” levels.

Insulin is either injected using a syringe or use an insulin pump, which is attached to the patient’s body and levels are adjusted as needed.

After being diagnosed, Lauren used the syringe for about nine months before switching to the pump.

“A lot of people think it’s an iPod,” she laughed. “Last year a teacher yelled at me because she thought it was an MP3 player.”

During the week-long camp, they often have speakers. One year a man who has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 40 years and described what it was like.

“He said the whole family would spend Saturday nights sharpening needles,” said Moyer.

Setebaid Services also offers Children’s Diabetes Conference, a three-day family weekend for children ages 3 to 12 and their families, in Danville.

This program may be used as a steppingstone into other camps through Setebaid Services.

“The project is for families who aren’t ready to let go,” said Moyer. “It can help parents start to feel more comfortable,” about letting their child alone.

The Children’s Diabetes Conference offers a variety of fun and educational activities for children as well as sessions for adults.

Some financial assistance is available. Registration for all camps is done online and limited to 400 children per year.

For more information, or to register for summer camp, visit www.setebaid.org.