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## Marlins pitcher McGowan shares story of triumph over diabetes

Miami Marlins Pitcher Dustin McGowan, who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 2004, visited the Diabetes Research Institute at the University of Miami medical school on Tues., June 21, 2016 to talk with children who also have the disease about living a complete and fulfilling life as they take control of their health. **Carl Juste** [cjuste@miamiherald.com](mailto:cjuste@miamiherald.com)

BY ADAM H. BEASLEY



Miami Marlins pitcher **Dustin McGowan** was a grown man when he learned he had Type 1 diabetes.

McGowan's daughter McKensy wasn't so lucky. She's had to face the disease — and the five daily injections that come with it — as a young girl.



But on Tuesday, McKensy, 7, remembered she's not alone. She met 10 other kids just like her.

McKensy's dad was the guest of honor at the **Diabetes Research Institute** at UHealth—the University of Miami Health System, where he told a roomful of diabetic children his story of perseverance.



“I hope I can show them, by playing at the highest level of a major sport, that I can with diabetes,” McGowan said. “If I can do it, anybody can do it. I’ve talked to people in the past that didn’t think they could play sports anymore because they have diabetes. I just hope to show them that you can.”

Dad and daughter are two of more than a million Americans suffering from Type 1 diabetes, a chronic condition in which the pancreas produces little or no insulin, a hormone that regulates blood sugar. Lack of insulin leads to increased blood sugar in blood and urine.

Only about 5 to 10 percent of those with diabetes have Type 1, which commonly affects children, teens and adults into their ‘30s. By contrast, 90 to 95 percent of those with diabetes have Type 2, a condition in which the body can’t use insulin properly. Type 2 typically develops in adulthood and is usually linked to weight and lack of exercise. (For this reason, overweight children are at risk.)

While there’s no cure, diabetes is treatable. In fact, researchers at the Institute are trying to develop a mini organ that would mimic the pancreas and produce insulin for Type 1 diabetics.

The exact cause of Type 1 diabetes is unknown, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#), but the illness often presents itself after a stress to the body.



For McGowan, 34, that stress was a major elbow injury as a minor-leaguer. During his recovery, he was going to the bathroom far-too-often, and was regularly tired and thirsty. Those are all flashing warning signs for diabetes.

A test revealed his blood-sugar level was 540 milligrams per deciliter—more than five times the normal range.

What was it like when you found out, one of the kids at DRI asked him.

“Rough,” he answered.

His diet — which included plenty of sugary drinks — had to change. So did his lifestyle.



Treatment for McGowan at first was insulin injections in the stomach, but he later decided to switch to a pump, which is plugged into his body at all times — including when he pitches.

The Marlins reliever keeps the beeper-sized device in his back pocket when in uniform.

“The pump tries to mimic, as best as possible, the native pancreas,” said [Gary Kleiman](#), senior director of medical development at DRI. “Your body's making insulin all the time. It's just a low level. We're able to set the pump at a specific level to give us a background rate.”

And while McGowan insists his diagnosis never jeopardized his playing career, there have been the occasional speed bumps.

He monitors his blood sugar regularly, but knows that adrenaline before an appearance in the game often spikes his levels. But in those moments, he'd rather his levels be a bit too high than a bit too low.

“I'll get it up a little bit throughout the game, just so I don't get it to that point,” McGowan said. “I can pitch with a high. It's not ideal. I might feel a little bit sluggish, this and that. But if it's low, I can pass out.”

The Marlins invited McGowan to spring training in March fully aware of his condition. The longtime Blue Jay made the team with a strong spring showing, and the right-hander has been a bright spot in Miami's bullpen.



Not long after winning the pitching post, McGowan toured the area around Marlins Park with wife Jilly and their two daughters. While driving through the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, McKensy spotted a familiar word on one of the buildings: diabetes.

As in, the Diabetes Research Institute. They'd later learn one of the world's leaders in cure-focused research is in the shadow of Dad's office.

**“We don't really talk about [diabetes] that much, because things [McKensy] wants to do or the struggles with it, having go to a birthday and having cake with the kids, is kind of hard sometimes,” McGowan said. “But we try to let her be a kid first.”**

**On Tuesday, she had plenty of company.**

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