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# THE UPS AND DOWNS

OF BIKE TOURING

WITH **TYPE 1**

# DIABETES

*CYCLING THE LAST FRONTIER AS TOLD  
THROUGH BLOOD SUGAR GRAPHS*

**IF** YOU LOOK AT THE EARLY  
TEXT MESSAGES EXCHANGED

BETWEEN ERIK AND ME, THEY CONTAIN  
NOT WORDS SO MUCH AS SCREENSHOTS  
OF OUR BLOOD SUGAR GRAPHS TAKEN  
FROM OUR DEXCOM CONTINUOUS  
GLUCOSE MONITORS (CGM). OFTEN  
RESEMBLING ROLLER COASTERS, THESE  
GRAPHS MAY LOOK LIKE MORSE CODE TO  
THE UNINITIATED.

**BUT THESE GRAPHS SAVE OUR LIVES**

**EVERY DAY.**

ON BIKE TRIPS, FOOD IS OUR FUEL.  
BUT TO TURN FOOD INTO FUEL, YOU  
NEED A WORKING PANCREAS. ERIK  
AND I KNOW EACH OTHER BECAUSE  
WE BOTH LACK ONE. IN OTHER WORDS,  
WE BOTH LIVE WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES  
(T1D). IT'S A CHRONIC CONDITION THAT  
CAUSES A PERSON'S PANCREAS TO STOP  
PRODUCING INSULIN, THE HORMONE  
THAT TURNS FOOD INTO ENERGY.

Our CGM graphs are used to monitor our blood sugar 24/7. Every 10 days, we insert a new sensor by pushing a fine needle into our skin. The sensor's transmitter relays blood sugar readings to our phones via Bluetooth every five minutes.

Because our pancreases are broken, we must do all the work for them by aiming to keep our CGM lines between 70 and 140 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL), a downright full-time job. We are constantly monitoring our numbers, making sure not to drop too low, which can be fatal in the short term, or too high, which can be fatal in the long term.

Blood sugar is affected by countless factors: stress, sugary foods, high altitudes, and heat bring it up; exercise, insulin, and water bring it down. But sometimes you do everything right, and you still have no idea why you're in the 300s. Erik uses an insulin pump and I use injections to administer synthetic insulin, a medication that keeps us alive but, if overused, can kill us.

Ninety years ago, a diagnosis of T1D was a death sentence. Today technology has taken us a long way. We live by these CGM graphs and feel naked without them. They give us peace of mind yet are also a constant reminder of how this disease is a never-ending catch-22.

But there's a bright side to this burden.

T1D is part of our identity. We wear these bionic-like devices on our skin like badges of honor. Like our loaded bicycles, these mysterious pods are the ultimate conversation starters. Every time someone asks me what the hell that is on my arm, I'm happy to educate. Our condition has made us realize that our health is not guaranteed and that we should do what makes us happy. In our minds, the definition of happiness is the bicycle. This disease is a pain, but it's also a huge reason why we cycled across America on the TransAmerica Trail last year and why we went on a 1,000-mile bike trip around Alaska this past summer.

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BIKE TOUR WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES?

We cycle slowly uphill and effortlessly cruise down, but our blood sugar trends behave in the opposite way. When our blood sugar rises, it spikes fast. Bringing a high blood sugar down, however, is no piece of cake. And eating cake would make things worse.

If we want to correct our high blood sugar quickly, there are three things we do to expedite the process — take insulin, drink water, and exercise. That's one of the reasons we love bicycle touring. Cycling itself acts as a fast-acting medication for our high blood sugars, which is why we joke that cycling is the cure.

For the most part, T1D is an invisible disability. If you don't notice the insulin pump strapped to Erik's shorts or the CGM sensor on my arm, we look healthy. Our CGM graphs are also the hidden dictators of our schedule. If my blood sugar is skyrocketing, it's time to get back on the bike. If it's

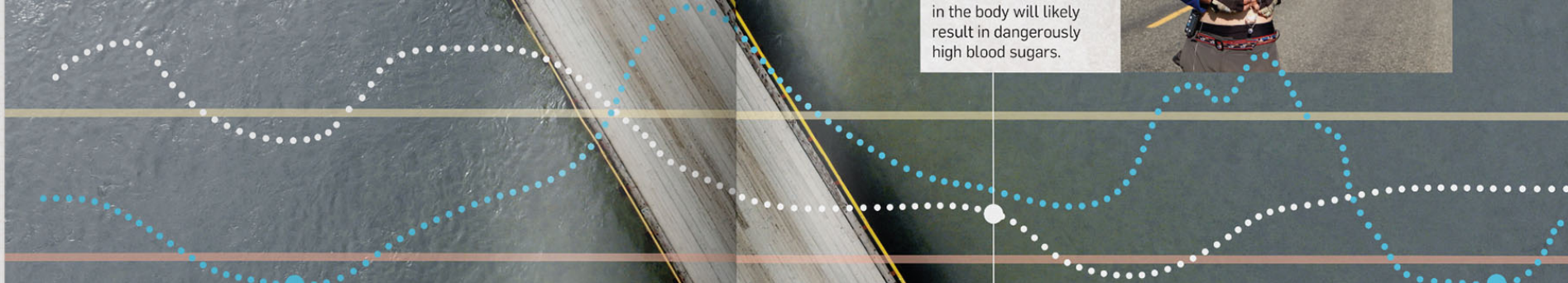
JULY 18, 2018



ERIK



ANNALISA

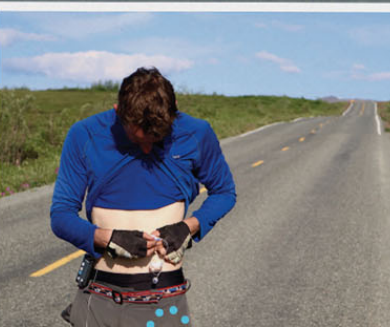


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I wake up sweating from a low blood sugar. I treat it with a few gummies and realize I've only got two packets left in my tent. My blood sugar continues to drop and with the rest of our food in a bear vault, I restrain myself from finishing off the last of my gummies. Instead, I wait 30 minutes until I finally see that up arrow.

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Along what feels like a cyclist's highway, Erik changes his site after his pump runs out of insulin. This has to be done ASAP as lack of insulin in the body will likely result in dangerously high blood sugars.



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It's 11:00 PM and the sun is still up. Mosquitos swarm us as we climb uphill and I've got yet another low blood sugar that won't budge. But I won't dare stop to treat it since these pesky bugs will only gather more if I do. So I go as slow as I can go without falling over.



12 AM

3 AM

6 AM

9 AM

12 PM

3 PM

6 PM

9 PM

12 AM

BLOOD SUGAR READING IN MG/DL



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plummeting, it's time for second breakfast.

When our 100-pound bicycles are leaning against a supermarket wall, people come up to us all the time. "Oh, good. Live your dreams while you're young and healthy," they say.

They don't know that, while they're talking to us, I'm wondering when I'll be able to get back on my bike because that lunch we just had is spiking my blood sugar like crazy. They don't know that the other day Erik could have easily had a seizure from his 40 mg/dL blood sugar reading. Every single thing we do and eat has consequences.

We all have something. And turning that something into a motivator to live our dreams now is one of the best decisions we've ever made. **GO**

Annalisa van den Bergh and Erik Douds are the creators of *Miles of Portraits*, a magazine and film about the people they meet as they (eventually) ride their bikes around the world. For more information, visit [milesofportraits.com](http://milesofportraits.com) and find them on Instagram at [@annalisavandenbergh](https://www.instagram.com/annalisavandenbergh), [@erikdouds](https://www.instagram.com/erikdouds), and [@milesofportraits](https://www.instagram.com/milesofportraits).

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