

‘I’ve been given a *second chance* and I’m not going to waste it!’

For author and former *The Age* editor **Michael Smith**, 63, a type 2 diagnosis was just the *wake-up call* he needed



Old-school journalists have a reputation for working and playing hard. Were you guilty of that?

I was a journalist for 25 years and my lifestyle was disgusting. I didn’t eat regularly, and what I did eat was bad. I drank too much alcohol, smoked, didn’t exercise and put on too much weight.

I spent several years as a medical reporter and knew about diabetes, but I didn’t follow the advice I was giving my readers. I was young and thought I was bulletproof. It sounds crazy, but that’s what happened.

You were initially diagnosed with type 2 in 1995. What did you do to get your health under control?

For a year or so I exercised every day. I went to the gym and the pool,

walked and cycled. I ate plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, protein in moderation, and minimal fat and sugar. I lost about 10 kilos, but then my diabetes became so stable that I was lulled into a false sense of security and slackened off.

Subconsciously, I thought I’d beaten it. Over the next few years, I slowed down on the exercise, until I was going for several weeks at a time without exercising. I gained weight. I was working very hard and I was stressed.

My blood glucose levels started to go up and I couldn’t control them. I needed more medication and, eventually, had to go on insulin. And then I had a heart attack, which really woke me up. That was seven years ago.

So, in a strange kind of way, a heart attack saved you?

I remember staring up into the lights in the cardiac catheter lab at my wife, kids and grandkids, not knowing whether I would pull through. That’s when I decided to change my ways. I could have died. I had a 90 per cent blockage – it wasn’t trivial – but they put in a couple of stents and I immediately felt good. In fact, I felt better than I had in 10 years. I was extremely lucky. I didn’t deserve that second chance, so I was determined to repay whoever gave it to me by not abusing the gift.

Was that when you decided to write a book about diabetes?

After having the stents put in, I was told I would have to stay in hospital.



Michael Smith says his wife Kay (left) ‘has been trying to save me from myself for 45 years.’

‘You don’t have to be a nun to live a good, healthy lifestyle with diabetes’

I needed something to keep me busy. The reporter in me took over and I started to learn about heart disease and what I had to do so it wouldn’t happen again. I wrote my book, *Downsize Me: How to Fight Diabetes and a Heart Attack*. The book has a chapter on diabetes, because it is one of the biggest heart-attack risk factors and the origin of my problems.

Did you decide you needed a complete lifestyle makeover after having your heart attack?

You don’t have to be a cloistered nun to live a good, healthy lifestyle with diabetes. You just have to make sensible, permanent changes. Quitting smoking was one of them



for me. I used to say it was easy to give up smoking – I’d done it 100 times! But after my heart attack, I gave it up immediately and never wanted a cigarette again. That’s how powerful that epiphany was. I cut stress out of my life, too. I run my own PR business, so I jacked up the fees. I ended up earning more money, doing less work with less stress, and losing 20 kilos in 18 months.

What changes did you make to your eating and exercise regimes?

If there are 21 meals in a week, I aim to get 19 of them near perfect.

I eat mainly carbohydrates, protein in moderation, plenty of fibre and fresh fruit and veg, and avoid fat and high-sugar foods.

Following this plan for 19 out of 21 meals gives me two wildcards a week, so I can go to a restaurant and loosen the reins a bit.

I get great satisfaction out of taking a brisk walk for an hour every morning. I love it when the weather is bad – when it is wet and cold – because I’m doing it despite the elements and nothing is going to stop me. I give myself five exercise wildcards a year, for when I’m sick or travelling. If I use one of my wildcards, I generally make it up – I do two sets of exercise in one day, to get it back.

Were there any challenges you didn’t anticipate?

Decoding food labels, because the food industry is so clever in making us buy things we shouldn’t. It’s almost as though the food labelling system in Australia was designed to confuse you. But if you stick with it, and learn the basic rules and what to look for, you can decipher the code.

Have you done it all on your own, or did you need support?

My wife, Kay, has been trying to save me from myself for 45 years, with some success recently. My heart attack didn’t surprise her. But she didn’t abandon me. She gave me 100 per cent love and support to make sure it didn’t happen again. ▶

READ MORE

The latest edition of *Diabetes Guide: 101 Things You Need to Know to Recover From & Reverse Diabetes* by Michael Smith (Wilkinson Publishing, \$11.99) is available at good bookstores.

AD

MY story

‘Having diabetes has taught me independence’

Growing up with type 1 hasn't stopped Western Warriors fast bowler **Matt Dixon**, 22, from *chasing his dream* of playing for Australia

You were only 10 when you were diagnosed. What do you remember about it?

We were on a family holiday and I was losing a lot of weight, going to the toilet frequently and drinking heaps of water. I felt really sick. A family friend had diabetes so we had a rough idea of what the symptoms were. That was lucky because the symptoms could have gone on for a lot longer. My main concern was whether I could have lollies again. Lollies really are the be-all and the end-all when you're a kid!

Were regular needles a daunting prospect for you?

I was a little scared at first. It took a bit of getting used to, but the needles didn't bother me much. I chose to give myself my needles and I was happy to do it. I just figured I'd rather be independent than rely on other people. At that stage, I was injecting about four



An intensive fitness regime helps Matt keep on top of his game.

times a day. When I was 12, I started on an insulin pump, so I don't need to inject any more. **The insulin?** lasts for 2-3 days, which has been a lot more manageable.

How did you rationalise your diagnosis as a kid?

Our family has no history of diabetes. For a while I wondered, 'Why me?' but I came to accept it. It's more of an annoyance rather than a hindrance, and now I can't

imagine not having it. I don't think life would be much different, to be honest. It's not the end of the world. It took six months to get used to, and then I was sorted. There's no point worrying about it and there's also no point in asking, 'What if?'

Are there any questions people tend to ask about your diabetes that drive you crackers?

You get ignorant questions all the time. The most common one is, 'Did you get diabetes because you ate too many lollies as a kid?' When people do ask, you can give a pretty simple answer. You tell them 'no' and that's it. ➤



MY story



Are there times when your physically-demanding lifestyle takes a toll?

If my diabetes was poorly managed, it could get in the way, but I haven't let it. I've missed less than five training sessions in three-and-a-half years because of low blood sugar.

At the moment, we're doing high-intensity training five days a week, which includes running, fielding and weights. It's hard work, but it helps to control my levels. I'm sure it would be harder to manage if I sat on my backside and did nothing.

My biggest challenge was keeping my blood sugars on track right after having surgery. I'm not sure whether this was due to taking painkillers or not being active. Anti-inflammatory injections throw my blood sugars around a bit, too.

What's your preferred sugar fix when your levels get too low?

I find soft drink works better than lollies because it's absorbed quicker. It's only happened a couple of times at training, and luckily, never while I've been driving. I can easily tell when I'm too low. I feel faint, go pale and get really hungry. I'm not as good at diagnosing my highs, though.

Do you ever feel the odd one out when your mates go out on the town?

There's nothing wrong with having a drink but you have to be smart about how much you have. I'm sensible if I choose to drink and I'm really proud that our team is sponsored by the WA Government's 'Alcohol. Think again' campaign. Given the amount of pre-season running we are doing right now, I'm drinking a lot of water. ■