



Staten Island Advance

Identify yourself

Over the past few years, companies have been popping up around the country touting trendier medical ID jewelry

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- When Carrie Pearlman was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age 8, she gladly donned the medical identification bracelet and necklace her parents purchased. In elementary school, she didn't really care about people's perceptions.

Now 13 years old, Carrie refers to her sportsband bracelet and medallion necklace as "dorky" and "ugly."

"I would never wear anything like that now," the Montclair, N.J., teen said. Instead, she recently purchased a discrete silver chain bracelet with the medical caduceus symbol on it.

"I just care mostly about how it's not noticeable," she explained.

Like Carrie, many teens are looking for something subtle and stylish. They want something that doesn't scream "I have an illness," or "I'm different."

Over the past few years, companies have been popping up around the country touting trendier medical ID jewelry. They offer everything from glow in the dark beads and Swarovski crystals to wood beads and leather straps that look like "normal" accessories.

"As they become adolescents, they become very self confident about their appearance and they don't want people to know they have diabetes," said Dr. Elaena Quattrocchi, a local diabetes educator who works with babies through teen-agers.

She recommends the chic jewelry to her patients. With type 1 diabetes, which is usually diagnosed at a young age, the body produces little or no insulin affecting blood sugar levels. Low blood sugar could lead to loss of consciousness, coma or even death.

Over the past five years, Dr. Quattrocchi noticed that the number of children with type 1 and type 2 diabetes -- which is normally associated with obesity -- on Staten Island has continued to rise. According to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF), more than 15,000 children are diagnosed with diabetes in the United States each year -- more than 40 children every day.

LIFESAVING ALERT

"I always stress, the most important thing is when you're not with your parents, you have to wear something," said Dr. Quattrocchi, executive vice president of the Island JDRF branch.

The jewelry usually provides important information on the back of the medical tag, such as allergies, medications and an emergency contact number. Patients with ailments including heart disease, cancer, asthma and allergies also sport the medical IDs.

Health care professionals, including EMTs and paramedics, are trained to look for the medical IDs around the neck and wrist.

Carrie's silver bracelet reads "Diabetes, insulin pump, call immediately," and gives a phone number.

"[I'm glad she wears the bracelet] mostly for the times she isn't with me, so it can speak for her," said Carrie's mom, Lorraine Pearlman, associate vice president of Staten Island University Hospital and board

member of the Island JDRF.

Once, while walking with friends, Carrie's blood sugar dropped. She didn't have food or money on her, so she went into a drug store and showed them the bracelet. Employees there gave her some juice and she later paid them back.

"I think the fact that it could potentially save your life would be a better reason to wear it than [to not wear it] because you're embarrassed," Carrie said.

LAUREN'S HOPE

In 2001, craft makers LeAnn Carlson and Denise Gaskill launched Lauren's Hope (laurenshope.com), which specializes in medical ID jewelry. The idea for the Riverside, Mo.-based company was sparked by Gaskill's then 13-year-old babysitter who refused to wear an ID bracelet for her diabetes.

"For kids especially, it's so important that they're willing to put that bracelet on," said Carlson. "If you have to deal with a medical condition, having a nice piece of jewelry is one small thing, but it means a lot."

One of the company's popular sellers is the mood bead bracelet, which changes color. They also have glow-in-the-dark, Swarovski crystal, pearl, fiber optic and natural stone jewelry with models for boys and men as well. The bracelets are interchangeable and hook onto the medical ID tags.

Tina Sprigg, founder of The Beadin' Beagle (beadin-beagle.com) in Boynton Beach, Fla., said one of her best sellers for teens is a Bohemian-looking mixed wood bracelet.

Sprigg started offering medical ID jewelry in 2004. Since then, business has at least doubled.

"It keeps growing," she said. "I get requests for different items." In addition to bracelets, she offers necklaces, anklets, keychains, purse charms, belt loop jewelry and cell phone charms. "No one leaves home without their cell phone."

Sprigg also wears a medical ID bracelet, having been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, an inflammatory bowel disorder, 16 years ago.

Jewelry designer Susan Eisen wears a bracelet as well, but for years she didn't want to. Diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 1988, she didn't want her customers to know about her medical condition.

"For four years, I tossed and turned with ideas of what I could do to identify myself and feel comfortable," said Eisen, president of Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry and Watches in El Paso, Texas. "I realized there were millions of other people out there just like me."

She created LIFETAG (lifetag.com) in the early 1990s, integrating the caduceus into silver, gold, rubber, bead and stainless steel jewelry. "It's more like adding a gemstone to a bracelet," she said of the red and white LIFETAG symbol.

Eisen's company also offers adhesive LIFETAG IDs -- which can stick on a watch band, bracelet or pendant -- for those who don't want to wear extra jewelry. Medical tags can also be integrated into pre-existing jewelry.

"The basic thing is to get over the stigma of wearing a medical ID and confront yourself and not be in denial," said Eisen. "Find the best medical ID that fits your personality. All it takes is one time for it to be a matter of life and death."

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