

Her mum had it, she has it and now Marcia fears diabetes is on the cards for Deni

To Australian Idol fans, glamorous showbiz veteran Marcia Hines was always a woman 'in control', as she dished out her wise words from the judges' panel. But behind the dazzling smile and encouraging advice to the young singers, Marcia, a diabetic, was masking her own secret worries throughout the series.

Would her blood glucose levels rise or fall unexpectedly, causing her to become vague or forgetful on live TV?

'Just in case the sugar levels dropped, I kept some lollies hidden behind my chair,' the singer reveals. Marcia wears an insulin pump on her belt that connects to a needle under the skin. This gives her a continuous insulin supply throughout the day.

Though Marcia, 51, has had diabetes since 1986, and says she is now 'at ease' with her condition in which her body can't properly use or make insulin, she must monitor her blood sugar levels every day.

'It's a very manageable disease but checking the blood sugar is never far from my mind,' she reveals.

'As a performer I have a responsibility to my audience to always be my best.'

Marcia, still reeling from the incredible career high of participating in Australian Idol, is now preparing to perform at some summer concerts and keeping fit and healthy is part of that preparation.

'I have a healthy lifestyle these days,' she declares, in contrast to when she was first diagnosed with diabetes. At the time, 19 years ago, the gorgeous diva was feeling overweight, moody and frumpy.

'I was big. I was a size 16. I remember walking down the street one day thinking someone was following me. I looked in the shop window to see who it was and it was my butt!' she jokes.

'And my mum would tease me and say: "Your butt's looking big." And I'd say: "Whatever!"' She shrugs at the memory.

'But more importantly, I just wasn't feeling right. I was really tired and really moody. I had shocking mood swings, I was always happy-sad, happy-sad.'

'It was exhausting. And I had an incredible thirst. I could drink 20 glasses of water in an hour. If I wasn't drinking water, I was rushing to the bathroom. I knew something was wrong, I just wasn't sure what.'

'If you're not bleeding or swelling, if you can feel it without seeing it, it can be that much harder to take seriously.'

'Finally mum went with me to the doctor and said: "Is my child dying?" After a few tests he said: "No, but she has diabetes.'

'From that moment, Marcia had to learn how to inject herself with insulin every day, though she now prefers using the insulin pump, which she says is a 'brilliant invention'.

'But it took me a while to come to terms with what I had to do to help myself. I was in denial for a couple of years about it. I never used to eat regularly,' she says.

'Sometimes I wouldn't eat anything for breakfast or lunch, I was just too busy. But now I always eat regular, healthy meals. And I eat in moderation.'

DIABETES FACTS

Diabetes occurs when there is too much glucose (sugar) in the blood. Sugar comes from carbohydrate foods like bread and pasta.

For glucose to enter the cells and be used for energy, a hormone called insulin must be available. Diabetes occurs when the body does not make insulin or when the insulin is not working properly.

Symptoms are excessive thirst and urination, tiredness, fatigue, irritability, weight problems and mood swings.

While 1.2 million Australians have diabetes, about 600,000 of them don't know it. A further two million Aussies have pre-diabetes, which usually leads to diabetes within five to ten years. Diabetes in Australia's fastest-growing chronic disease and in the past 20 years, the number of Aussie adults with diabetes has tripled.

Type 1 diabetes usually affects children or adolescents, but it can affect adults. Treatment is insulin injections or increasingly popular pump therapy which

Marcia now believes that her illness was a blessing in disguise.

'I take so much more care with my health. I exercise every day – I rollerblade, cycle or walk the dogs -and I have eight hours sleep a night.

'And I never miss a meal now,' she says -all a far cry from her erratic, pre-diabetes lifestyle.

results in less hypoglycaemic events than injection therapy.

It also allows more flexibility in eating without a strict timetable. Type 2 diabetes can often be improved by diet and lifestyle changes.

Between 65 to 80 per cent of people with diabetes will die of coronary heart disease.

Source: Diabetes Australia, NSW

A few years later, Marcia's mother was also diagnosed with diabetes.

'It's genetic in our family,' says Marcia, who believes her daughter Deni is likely to get diabetes one day too.

Now a spokesperson for Diabetes Australia, Marcia fears there could be thousands of Australians who don't yet know they have the disease which, if left untreated, can lead to death.

'I would urge anyone to get medical help if they have any inkling that something isn't quite right,' Marcia says.

These days of course, Marcia's favourite doctor is the man she lives with, her partner and Newcastle GP Dr Chris Morrissey, who is the brother of fashion designer Peter Morrissey.

'He's a great person, very level-headed, and he helped me through a very stressful time in 2003 when my mother died,' she says.

Marcia believes that her partner has helped her work out what being in a great relationship really means.

'A good relationship is one where you learn to shut up, where you don't always have to be right and when one of you is down you lift the other one up -he's very good like that!' she says.

By Jacqui Lang