

# Gerri Winkler

Mr. Winkler, a diabetic patient for 21 years, recently climbed Mt McKinley and is in pursuit of climbing the Seven Summits.



## 1. What made you decide to climb Mt McKinley?

I have climbed mountains all over the world, and I have three of the Seven Summits. I climbed Mt Vinson Masiff (16,863 feet), Mt Aconcagua in Argentina (22,841 feet) and Mt Elbrus in Russia (18,841 feet). I am thinking of climbing all seven. I wanted to climb Mt McKinley because it is the highest in North America. We flew in on May 22, and we reached high camp at 17,200 feet on June 2. That is the last place where you can sleep. We stayed 5 days ... then a heavy storm hit so we fled from high camp. We came down due to bad weather on June 10. I wanted to make a second attempt, but the expedition was finished. The decision was hard to accept. I felt really good and it was the last stretch.

## 2. What are some precautions and/or supplies you have to take when you are a diabetic climber?

I have been climbing for about 20 years. I have had diabetes for 21 years, and it has never prevented me from climbing mountains. I was the first diabetic person in the world to climb higher than 25,000 feet. I had to experience some things that diabetic patients should pay attention to. One thing that is not really known, your blood glucose runs high when you are at a high altitude. I have found that charantea (*momordica charantia*) helps your blood glucose, and I drink this tea on the mountain. It is produced in a plant grown mostly in Asia and has been used in the Phillipines for centuries to combat diabetes. It makes my blood sugar more stable. I have almost normal levels when I am climbing at 7,000 to 7,500 meters.

You also have to store the insulin somewhere warm because it shouldn't freeze. I always wear a jacket under my down jacket to keep the insulin on my body. You have to think of how to store supplies, but every mountain is possible to climb for a diabetic patient. I never had a problem

because of my diabetes. I was sometimes tired or exhausted, but it was not because I was diabetic – it was because I am human.

## 3. How did the trip effect your diabetes and how was your diabetes control?

I had really good blood glucose readings. I tested four times a day. I may do five or six in Austria when I am at home, but four times a day is okay. You can only do it in the tent because it is too cold and windy outside.

## 4. What is your next adventure?

Now, I am thinking about Mt Everest in Asia. I would cycle to Nepal from Europe, and walk in to the mountains to join the expedition.

## 5. How has diabetes care changed, from your perspective, since you have had diabetes?

When I was diagnosed with diabetes 21 years ago, diabetes treatment was quite different, and they told me I had to live a quiet life because of hypoglycemia. But I was the first marathon runner with diabetes in middle Europe in 1987. Before I started the marathon, doctors told me I would die. I said that I knew I could do it. Afterwards, they were interested that I did a lot of forbidden sports for diabetic patients. I was the first to scuba dive, and after my experience they released the prohibition for diabetics to scuba dive. I never accepted all of these prohibitions for diabetic patients.

When I was first diagnosed, I had bad glucose readings because I did not want to accept that I had diabetes. But, then I found ways to take care of my health while at the same time living my dream. ■

### THE SEVEN SUMMITS

- Kilimanjaro: Africa, 19,340 feet
  - It is an extinct volcano with three peaks.
- Denali: Alaska, 20,320 feet
  - Better known as Mt McKinley.
- Elbrus: Europe, 18,510 feet
  - The mountain has two summits and a cable car running up the mountain.
- Aconcagua: South America, 22,841 feet
  - It is the highest point outside of Asia.
- Carstensz Pyramid: Australia/Oceania, 16,023 feet
  - This is technically the hardest of the summits to climb.
- Vinson: Antartica, 16,0670 feet
  - The mountain was discovered by a US Navy craft.
- Everest: Asia, 29,035 feet
  - Considered the "summit of all summits."

Source: <http://7summits.com>