Saved by the Gila Monster

An injectable drug helps control diabetes—using the saliva of a lizard.

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More than 25 million Americans are living with diabetes, a condition in which the body doesn't adjust insulin and blood glucose (sugar) levels correctly. African Americans and Latinos are twice as likely as other groups to have diabetes; many people with HIV get it too.

That last group includes me, and my HIV makes treating my diabetes more challenging. For example, some HIV meds upset the body's regulation of insulin, and lipoatrophy (misdistribution of body fat, another part of living with the virus) disrupts how the body controls glucose. These can worsen diabetes.

When my doctor called on Christmas Eve 2009 to deliver my diabetes diagnosis, he also said I had metabolic syndrome. That, I learned, means having three or more of the following conditions: diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, high triglycerides (a blood fat), elevated fasting blood glucose and low HDL (high density lipoproteins or "good cholesterol"). I have all of the above, increasing my risk of heart disease and stroke.

Simple medication normalized my blood pressure, triglycerides and cholesterol (blood fats). But treating diabetes was tougher because of my various ailments and the many prescription drugs I take each day.

My endocrinologist prescribed a twice-daily auto-injectable pen filled with Byetta (exenatide). That's a synthetic version of a protein found in the saliva of Gila monsters, venomous lizards that inhabit the southwestern deserts of North America.

Byetta brought my lab numbers into the healthy normal range. The downside? If you don't eat immediately after each injection, you can become nauseated. And I did.

After two years, I gave up battling the nausea and stopped using Byetta. As a result, my fasting blood glucose zoomed back into the danger zone.

But my doctor came through again and suggested I try a new form of Byetta: a once-a-week self-administered injection called Bydureon. For me, adjusting mealtimes once a week was much easier than doing it twice a day. The nausea disappeared, and within a few weeks, my fasting

blood glucose returned to safe levels.

As Lady Gaga says, “Thanks, little monsters!”

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