When my son was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of four, I quickly realized there were going to be many variables in managing his diabetes on a daily basis that were completely out of my control, awareness, and sometimes even understanding. Overnight, we had to learn how to dose insulin, quantify activity, and count aspects of food that just 24 hours earlier we had not had to think about. Growth spurts, emotions, temperature, seasonal allergies, and illness, we would learn, would affect my son’s blood sugar levels and present challenges to our ability to explain the various numbers and feelings they inspired.

As a parent with a newly diagnosed child with type 1 diabetes, I decided to accept the variables within my control to the best of my ability, and commit to finding tools to mitigate the stress of meal times both at home and “out in the wild,” with diabetes. I committed to that decision then, and I still do today.

Keeping up has not always been easy. As the years go by, the tools that we use to help us manage diabetes continuously change and update. New technologies come to market. New inventions are introduced. New ways of thinking are encouraged as we both grow up with diabetes now.
For managing my son’s everyday needs, my favorite survival tool (aside from his life saving insulin of course!) is my food scale. It’s easy to find hundreds of different food scales online or at a local home goods store, but the one I have found the most success with is the Perfect Portions Nutritional Scale. As a parent of a child with type 1 diabetes, it is critical for me to know exactly how many carbohydrates he is eating, especially when I’m making complex homemade recipes. After combining all of the ingredients, knowing the nutritional content of everything I make can be daunting. This scale takes a lot of the guesswork out of the equation by including a catalog of hundreds of codes for raw and prepared fruits, vegetables, grains, condiments, and proteins. It even specifies whether whole wheat pasta is dry or cooked, which makes a significant difference given the dense carbohydrates in these types of foods.

The Perfect Portions Nutritional Scale converts my recipes to easy, accurate portions, and allows me to know what the nutrition label would look like for many pre-programmed foods. Want to know what a carbohydrate count would be for a fruit smoothie with bananas and strawberries? Just place your empty smoothie container on the scale and zero it out (or “tare” it) so you are not weighing the container itself. Then enter the food code for a banana, place it in the container and…PRESTO! The scale provides a complete nutrition label. Repeat the process for strawberries. In a few minutes, you can quickly tally up all of the carbohydrate grams for each food in your smoothie for a quick and easy carb count, and take a lot of the guesswork out of the amount of insulin required to cover the treat.

Over time, I have found that using this food scale has been an educational process for me and my son. Learning how to better count nutritional information at home, and learn what foods look like at certain numbers of carbohydrates, have allowed us to better estimate insulin needs “out in the wild.” It is a simple example, but we are more adept at visually differentiating between a 20 carbohydrate gram banana and a 35 carbohydrate banana without the scale. After all, a 15 carbohydrate grams difference is huge with a small child, and sometimes even an adult. When we are dining out, we are more skilled at estimating carb counts because we are accustomed to seeing the carb count on the scale, and the size of the serving of food correlates with that number.

However, sometimes having the scale as a survival tool simply isn’t an option. As each year with type 1 diabetes goes by, the demands on growing up increase, and we find ourselves in situations that are new and come with their own unpredictabilities. In lieu of a food scale, a valuable resource that I’ve relied on to help manage meal planning is the Recipe Nutrition Calculator from www.verywell.com. Similar to the food scale, you can manually list the ingredients of your favorite homemade dishes and then generate a nutrition label for the recipe. Enter the ingredients, determine the number of servings, and then analyze. It isn’t as exact of a science compared to the food scale, but it is a great backup solution to determining complete nutrition information that includes carbohydrate grams, vitamins, minerals, fat grams, protein grams, and total calories.

As a parent of a child with T1D, I welcome ways to make managing mealtimes easier. I fully expect, with time and experience, we will find more tools that help us survive the daily ins and outs of diabetes. The Perfect Portions Nutritional Scale and the Recipe Nutrition Calculator are great tools to help me navigate the tricky world of carb counting and lessen my stress so that I can focus on what’s most important: providing my son with the proper fuel and nutrition he needs to live well and grow strong with diabetes.