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## Insulin pill may buy time for relatives of diabetics

*VU study looks at delaying disease*

By CLAUDIA PINTO  
Staff Writer

Type 1 diabetes has caused 9-year-old Lauren Harrington to regularly endure two of the things kids hate most: shots and going without dessert.

Lauren's twin sister, Lea, hasn't developed the highly inheritable disease. And Vanderbilt children's hospital researchers are hoping to keep it that way for as long as possible.

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Lea will participate in a Vanderbilt study that's seeking to determine whether taking a daily

insulin pill postpones the onset of type 1 diabetes in high-risk individuals for several years. Dr. Bill Russell, director of pediatric endocrinology at Vanderbilt, said delaying the disease could delay serious complications that sometimes occur.

"Complications are largely dependent on how long you've had type 1 diabetes," he said.

With type 1 diabetes, a person's own immune cells destroy the cells in the pancreas that produce insulin. Insulin is a hormone that converts sugar, starches and other food into energy.



enlarge 

Kimberly Harrington holds the hands of her 9-year-old twin daughters, Lea, left, and Lauren on Friday at their Murfreesboro home. Lauren was recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. (MANDY LUNN / THE TENNESSEAN)

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More than 1 million Americans have type 1 diabetes, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Symptoms of the disease — increased thirst, frequent urination, extreme hunger, weight loss, fatigue and blurred vision — typically occur during childhood or adolescence. Long-term complications can include kidney failure, heart disease, amputation and blindness.

Kimberly Harrington, the twins' mother, said even with adult supervision, type 1 diabetes is a lot for a child to handle. Since being diagnosed with the disease in August, Lauren takes four shots of insulin a day, checks her blood sugar seven or eight times a day, and watches her diet by limiting sweets and carbohydrates.

"If we can delay it, she (Lea) would be mature enough to handle it," said Harrington of Murfreesboro. "She's only 9. They are twins, but their personalities are different. Lea doesn't like to be pricked."

In the Vanderbilt study, individuals with a high-risk of developing type 1 diabetes will take a daily insulin pill or a placebo.

Preliminary results of another study showed that taking insulin pills could delay the onset of type 1 diabetes by four-and-a-half years, Russell said.

"I think there is real hope for this," he said.

### Insulin sneaks into body

Russell said it's believed that insulin pills may delay the onset of type 1 diabetes by convincing the body not to attack the insulin-producing cells.

"If you are introduced to an antigen (foreign substance) in small amounts you can become immune to it," Russell said. "The body doesn't recognize it as a foreign invader and try to attack."

To participate in the study, individuals must have a greater than 50 percent chance of developing type 1 diabetes. High-risk individuals are determined through a blood test, which shows the presence of antibodies that attack insulin-producing cells.

People aged 45 and younger who have a relative with type 1 diabetes can apply. For more information, call 936-8638.

Vanderbilt is one of 42 worldwide sites involved in the study. Between 300 and 450 people are expected to participate over a six- to eight-year period.

The research at Vanderbilt is being funded by \$450,000 annual grant by the National Institutes of

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