

# Diabetes on the big screen



Screenwriters can find drama anywhere—natural disasters, business ventures, star-crossed lovers. But when the topic du jour is diabetes, how accurately is it portrayed? We asked the experts to judge.

BY Jennifer Wilson

The topic of diabetes is a good plot device for thrillers (the wife in *Memento*, murdered by an insulin overdose), it adds character dimension (the bank manager in *Dog Day Afternoon*, Jackie in *Mad Money*), and it delivers sentimental punch (Irma P. Hall as Mama Joe in *Soul Food*). We've asked people in the diabetes community what they think about the portrayal of characters with diabetes and to rate them on a scale of 1 to 5 test strips—1 being badly inaccurate and 5 being on-target.



Al Pacino, *The Godfather: Part III*

**Michael Corleone in *The Godfather: Part III* (1990)**

**3 TEST STRIPS**

Don Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) is weakening in his old age—not good for a Mafia boss. His diabetes affects his vision and causes a “diabetic stroke.” After the Don has a low blood sugar, his priest notes: “Your mind suffers and the body cries out.” **What the expert says:** “How could anyone argue against the master, Al Pacino, even if this movie didn’t live up to the original?” says Kelly Close, type 1 and editor in chief of *diaTribe* ([diatribe.us](http://diatribe.us)), an e-newsletter and Web site. “Extra points for diabetes visibility (so long ago!) and for explaining in the movie that blood glucose is sometimes affected by stress.”

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## Popcorn, 1 cup: **Movie-theater (no butter), 64 calories, 6 g carb., 4 g fat. Air-popped, 31 calories, 6 g carb., 0 g fat.**

### Shelby in *Steel Magnolias* (1989)



Who can forget stepping into Truvy's Beauty Parlor to find M'Lynn (Sally Field) force-feeding juice to daughter Shelby (Julia Roberts)? Shelby wants children; her doctor says it could be deadly. Cue heavy foreshadowing.

**What the experts say:** Reviews are mixed on this one. "Completely irresponsible," says Paula Wilson, parent of a child with diabetes and regional board chair for the Diabetes Research Institute Foundation at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine. "They used scare tactics that just aren't true."

Close disagrees. "So Julia Roberts goes from fine to severely hypoglycemic in one second—that's not entirely accurate, but that's the movies," she says. "A wonderful diabetes educator reminded me recently that one reason diabetes is tough is that the failures are so public and the victories are so private. Everyone remembers this movie's failures. Actually, Shelby was triumphant in her drive to have children. It was her dream and she did it, and I was very moved."

### The daughter in *Panic Room* (2002)



Young Sarah Altman (Kristen Stewart) and her mom (Jodie Foster) are trapped in their new

apartment's "safe room" after a burglary. High drama—with a few inaccuracies. Although Sarah eats pizza and drinks regular soda for dinner, her blood sugar plunges enough to require glucagon. The burglar could have handed Sarah juice before grabbing the glucagon.

**What the expert says:** "I thought it was fairly responsible," Wilson says. "Of course, they heightened the whole she's-gonna-die thing, but it's pretty true to life."

### The daughter in *Derailed* (2005)



Addison Timlin plays teenager Amy, whose type 1 diabetes severely strains her parents' marriage. Dad (Clive Owen) has a tryst (with Jennifer Aniston's character)—and uses money saved for Amy's kidney transplant to extract himself from the mess.

**What the expert says:** "So ridiculous," says Hope Boliss, a former television producer who has type 1. "That's not diabetes. Completely over-the-top."

### The landlord in *Chocolat* (2000)



Dame Judi Dench plays Armande Voizin, a freethinker with diabetes in perhaps the only uptight French town ever. Dench's character dies after she overindulges in chocolate.



Judi Dench, *Chocolat*

**What the expert says:** "Kind of the *Steel Magnolias* syndrome in terms of drama," says Leslie Schwartz, national director of media relations for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International. "Diabetes is a very serious disease, but if you manage it, you'll be OK. [Dench] was like the proverbial kid in the candy shop."

### Harry Ironminister in *The Right Hand Man* (1987)



Rupert Everett plays an 1860s Australian lord who has diabetes. When asked why he wouldn't see a doctor who's had some success with treatment, Lord Harry says that he's too tired to think about it.

**What the expert says:** "Unfortunately, no matter where you are on the globe, you'll see people ignoring their diabetes," Close says. "It's not an uplifting portrayal, but I'd be hard-pressed to say it isn't accurate."

