

# **Hypoglycemia: A Barrier to Diabetes Management**

Hypoglycemia occurs when blood glucose levels fall below 3.5 mmol/L. Knowing the symptoms and causes of hypoglycemia can help you avoid a hypo.

## **What is hypoglycemia?**

Hypoglycemia occurs when the level of glucose present in the blood falls below a set point:

- **Below 3 mmol/L** (millimoles per litre)

Being aware of the early signs of hypoglycemia will allow you to treat your low blood glucose levels quickly - in order to bring them back into the normal range.

It is also recommended to make close friends and family aware of the signs of hypoglycemia in case you fail to recognise the symptoms.

## **What are the symptoms of hypoglycemia?**

The main symptoms associated with hypoglycemia are:

- Sweating
- Fatigue
- Feeling dizzy

Symptoms of hypoglycemia can also include:

- Being pale
- Feeling weak
- Feeling hungry
- A higher heart rate than usual
- Blurred vision
- Temporary loss of consciousness
- Confusion
- Convulsions
- And in extreme cases, coma

## **What are the causes of hypoglycemia?**

Hypoglycemia is caused by a variety of different factors, all of which diabetics need to be aware of.

- Alcohol can cause hypoglycemia, as alcoholic drinks often lower blood sugar levels.
- Taking too much insulin can also cause hypoglycemic episodes.

- Hypos can also occur when the body needs more energy than the calories you have eaten can provide.

### **How serious is hypoglycemia?**

Hypoglycemic episodes can range from mild to severe. Mild hypoglycemia is generally able to be treated by the individual.

However, severe hypoglycemia will need aid from a family member or doctor.

### **What are the health impacts of hypoglycemia?**

Hypoglycemia, as well as being frightening for yourself and those around, can lead to the following:

- Cognitive decline
- Impact on brain power
- Dead in bed syndrome
- Weight gain

### **Do symptoms always occur before hypoglycemia?**

Most people experience some warnings before the onset of hypoglycemia. However, some diabetics may experience little or no warning before the onset of sudden or severe hypoglycemia.

### **What is the best way to avoid hypoglycemia?**

To avoid hypoglycemia, diabetes experts advise diabetics to keep a constant level of glucose in the blood. Testing blood sugar levels regularly to make sure they are not rising or falling below the optimum level.

### **How is hypoglycemia diagnosed?**

A diagnosis of hypoglycemia is made by measuring blood sugar levels with a glucose meter. Any **blood glucose level below 3.0 mmol/L** indicates that the individual has hypoglycemia.

**NB:** Urine tests do not detect hypoglycemia.

### **How do I treat hypoglycemia?**

A mild case of hypoglycemia can be treated through eating or drinking approximately 10-20g of sugar (i.e. carbohydrates). Some diabetics carry glucose tablets for this express purpose.

Serious hypoglycemia will require medical attention. In this instance, paramedics will use glucagon or provide glucose intravenously. Some diabetics have glucagons injections at home, in the form of glucagons kits.

This allows immediate treatment and the possibility of avoiding hospital. For those diabetics that experience regular hypoglycemia, blood sugar levels should be tested regularly.

### **How can I avoid and be prepared for hypoglycemia?**

Knowing and being aware of the symptoms of hypoglycemia allow diabetics to get treatment quickly. Experts advise diabetics to always carry sugar (glucose tablets are effective). Measuring blood glucose levels regularly, and in accordance with one's lifestyle, is also recommended.

Eating regularly and being aware of how food affects your blood sugar levels allows, as does taking care when doing exercise.

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