

DIABETES: ACUTE COMPLICATIONS. HYPOGLYCAEMIA

Hypoglycaemia is the most frequently occurring acute complication in diabetic patients and is due to a sudden drop in the amount of sugar (glucose) in the blood.

What levels of sugar (glucose) in the blood are considered low?

- Less than 50 mg/dl in capillary blood (when you have your finger pricked for a sample).
- Less than 60 mg/dl in blood extracted from a vein.

Are all types of hypoglycaemia the same?

There are various types of hypoglycaemia. They are classified according to their seriousness and range from minor to loss of consciousness:

- Minor-moderate: the patient is aware of the symptoms, is able to perceive them as such and can treat him- or herself.
- Serious: requires the help of another person to deal with the situation.
- Hypoglycaemic coma: the patient is unconscious (this is an extremely serious situation).

How do you feel when you have hypoglycaemia?

The symptoms of hypoglycaemia are extremely varied. They are not the same in all diabetics or in every episode in the same person.

It is important for every diabetic to be able to recognise when an episode of hypoglycaemia is coming on and their reactions to it. This can be done with the advice and information provided by healthcare professionals. This will enable you to deal with such situations quickly and by yourself.

The symptoms may be:

- In cases of slight-moderate hypoglycaemia: sweating, pins and needles, shaking, nervousness, anxiety, palpitations, feeling hungry, feeling hot.
- Indicating serious hypoglycaemia: confusion, alterations of speech and behaviour, convulsions, drowsiness, coma.



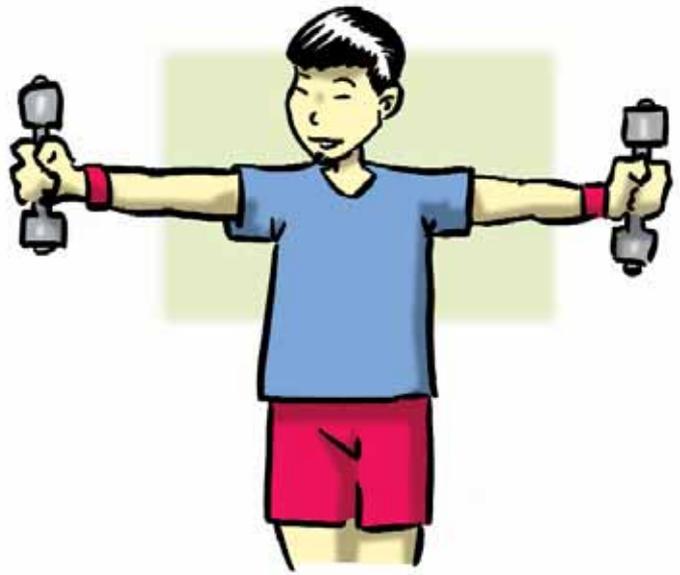
What can trigger hypoglycaemia?

- Excess insulin. The resulting blood sugar level required to trigger hypoglycaemia varies a great deal and it depends on how fast it is absorbed and how long the action of the insulin lasts. Some kinds of pills for treating diabetes may also cause hypoglycaemia.
- Delaying or diminishing the intake of food.
- Increasing the amount of physical exercise.
- Other causes: excess alcohol, liver diseases.

Diabetes Education

What should I think of hypoglycaemia?

- Hypoglycaemia should never be a reason to be afraid or to refuse treatment with insulin or pills.
- Hypoglycaemia in a properly trained patient is easy to correct. That is why health education is so important.
- Failure to stick to set mealtimes and types of food is a common cause of a drop in blood sugar level.
- Unplanned intense physical exercise is another common cause.
- If hypoglycaemia appears when you are taking pills or occurs repeatedly, you must always consult your medical team so that they can check the cause and either help you to adopt correct habits or change your treatment.
- The occurrence of hypoglycaemia is very often associated with insulin treatment.
- Better control of your diabetes is of undoubted benefit to you in the long run. Having less complications later on in life makes up for the risk of hypoglycaemia.



What can I do if I suspect that I have hypoglycaemia?

- If you can get a capillary (finger-prick) glucose test done quickly and act.
- If that is not possible, don't wait for the results of the test and act as if the hypoglycaemia was confirmed.
- Have some food (carbohydrates) right away that raises the blood sugar level quickly:
 - A glass of natural fruit juice or 2 lumps or
 - 1 sachet of sugar
 - 2-3 teaspoonfuls of sugar or 2 sweets
 - A glass of cola or two tablets of pure glucose
- If the symptoms persist, this can be repeated after 15-30 minutes.
- Later on, have some food (another type of carbohydrate) that raises the blood sugar level more slowly and for a longer time, to prevent a relapse:
 - 1-2 pieces of fruit or 4-6 plain (Maria-type) biscuits
 - 20-40 grams of bread or 2-3 slices of toast
 - 2 glasses of milk or 1 glass of milk and 2 biscuits
- If the patient has lost consciousness, never give him or her food by mouth. Give them a glucagon injection and contact the healthcare team.
- Test again after 5-10 minutes and if there is no improvement administer glucagon again.
- If the hypoglycaemia is due to the intake of alcohol, glucagon is not effective. Summon healthcare assistance.
- It is advisable for all diabetics being treated with insulin to keep a packet of glucagon in their home (ask the doctor for one).
- It is extremely important to show relatives and other people close to the patient how hypoglycaemia manifests itself and what to do if it occurs.