

Hypoglycaemia and diabetes

What is hypoglycaemia?

Hypoglycaemia (also called a 'hypo', low blood glucose or insulin reaction) is when your blood glucose level has dropped too low. This occurs when the level falls below 4 mmol/L although this can vary. While hypoglycaemia can be experienced by people taking certain tablets for their diabetes, it is more common in people who inject insulin. It is not a problem for people who manage their diabetes through a healthy eating plan alone.

What are the main causes of hypoglycaemia?

Hypoglycaemia can be caused by one or a number of events such as:

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| • Delaying or missing a meal. | • Not eating enough carbohydrate. |
| • Unplanned physical activity. | • More strenuous exercise than usual. |
| • Drinking alcohol*. | • Too much insulin or diabetes tablets. |

While these are known causes of hypoglycaemia, in many cases, no specific cause can be identified.

* *The risk of hypoglycaemia increases, the more alcohol you drink. Refer to the 'Alcohol and Diabetes' information sheet.*

What are the symptoms?

While symptoms vary from person to person, common feelings are:

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| • Weakness, trembling or shaking. | • Sweating. |
| • Light headedness. | • Headache. |
| • Dizziness. | • Lack of concentration/behaviour change. |
| • Tearful/crying. | • Irritability. |
| • Hunger. | • Numbness around the lips and fingers. |

If you feel any of these symptoms, test your blood glucose level if time and circumstances permit. If you are unable to do so, treat as a 'hypo' just to be sure.

It is important to treat a 'hypo' immediately to stop your blood glucose level from dropping lower. See next page.



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How is a 'hypo' treated?

The first thing to do is to be sure you're safe. For example, if you're driving a vehicle, pull over to the side of the road. Then:

MOST IMPORTANT

Have some quick acting carbohydrate that is easy to consume, for example:

- 1/2 can of regular soft drink (not 'diet') OR
- 1/2 glass of fruit juice OR
- 3 teaspoons of sugar or honey OR
- 6-7 jellybeans OR
- glucose tablets equivalent to 15grams carbohydrate.

The following steps are also recommended. The order and timing of these steps depends on the severity of the 'hypo' and your time and circumstances.

- Wait 10-15 minutes. If it isn't rising, repeat treatment with a quick acting carbohydrate as described above.
- If your next meal is more than 20 minutes away, eat some longer acting carbohydrate. This could be one of the following:
 - A sandwich OR
 - 1 glass of milk or soy milk OR
 - 1 piece of fruit OR
 - 2-3 pieces of dried apricots, figs or other dried fruit OR
 - 1 tub of natural low fat yoghurt OR
 - 6 small dry biscuits and cheese.



What happens if it's not treated?

If not treated quickly, the blood glucose level can continue to drop which may progress to:

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| • Loss of coordination. | • Slurred speech. |
| • Confusion. | • Loss of consciousness/fitting. |

You will need the help of others.

What to do if the person is unconscious, drowsy or unable to swallow

THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!

They must not be given any food or drink by mouth. Here's what needs to be done:

- Place the person on their side making sure their airway is clear.
- Give an injection of Glucagon if available and you are trained to give it.
- Phone for an ambulance (dial 000) stating a 'diabetic emergency'.
- Wait with the person until the ambulance arrives.
- When they regain consciousness, the person will require carbohydrate to maintain their blood glucose level.

Glucagon

Glucagon is a hormone which raises the blood glucose level and is injected in a similar way to insulin. Glucagon is recommended to reverse severe hypoglycaemia in people with diabetes. If you are able to treat your own 'hypo', you do not need Glucagon which is always given by another person. Your doctor or diabetes educator will recommend you have Glucagon on hand in case of a severe 'hypo' and will show you, your family and friends how to use it.



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What else should I do?

- Wear identification that says you have diabetes.
- Make a note in your monitoring book of any 'hypos' you have and discuss it with your doctor or diabetes educator at your next visit.
- Make sure your family, friends, co-workers, school staff and carers know how to recognise and treat hypoglycaemia.
- Look for the cause of your 'hypo' so you can try to prevent the situation from occurring again.
- Contact your doctor or diabetes educator if you are having 'hypos' often.
- If on insulin or certain types of diabetes medication, always carry quick acting 'hypo' treatment with you.
- If taking medication called Acarbose (Glucobay®) carry pure glucose with you such as glucose tablets, glucose gel or Lucozade.
- Refer to the *Alcohol and Diabetes* information sheet for more advice about drinking alcohol and hypoglycaemia.
- Eat carbohydrates if you are drinking alcohol.
- It is advised to test your blood glucose level and ensure it is above 4 mmol/L before driving a motor vehicle.

Would you like to join Australia's leading diabetes organisation?

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For more information phone 1300 136 588

Website: www.diabetesaustralia.com.au

Multilingual information: www.multilingualdiabetes.org.au

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