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Diabetic hypoglycemia

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Overview

Diabetic hypoglycemia refers to low blood sugar levels in a person with diabetes. Blood sugar, also called glucose, is the main source of fuel for the body and brain. You can't function well if your blood sugar drops below a healthy range.

For many people, hypoglycemia is a blood sugar level below 70 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL) or 3.9 millimoles per liter (mmol/L). But your numbers might be different. Ask your healthcare professional about the right range for your blood sugar. This also is called your target range.

Pay attention to the early symptoms of hypoglycemia. Treat low blood sugar right away. You can raise your blood sugar quickly by taking glucose tablets. Or have a source of simple sugar, such as hard candy, fruit juice or regular soda.

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with hypoglycemia. Let them know what to do if you're not able to treat the condition yourself.

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Symptoms

Diabetic hypoglycemia can cause a number of symptoms. The symptoms depend on factors such as how long you've been getting low blood sugar and how serious it is. Even the time of day can play a role.

Early symptoms

At first, symptoms of diabetic hypoglycemia include:

- Faded skin color, also called pallor.
- Shakiness.
- Dizziness.
- Sweating.
- Hunger or upset stomach.
- A heartbeat that feels fast or irregular.

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- Irritable mood or anxiety.
- Headache.
- Tingling or loss of feeling in the lips, tongue or cheek.

Symptoms at night

If diabetic hypoglycemia happens when you're sleeping, symptoms that may disturb your sleep include:

- Damp sheets or nightclothes due to sweating.
- Nightmares.
- Tiredness, irritable mood or confusion when you wake up.

Severe symptoms

If diabetic hypoglycemia isn't treated, symptoms of low blood sugar get worse. These symptoms can include:

- Confusion, unusual behavior or both, such as not being able to complete routine tasks.
- Clumsiness or loss of coordination.
- Trouble speaking or slurred speech.
- Blurry or tunnel vision.
- Not being able to eat or drink.
- Muscle weakness.
- Drowsiness.

Severe hypoglycemia can cause:

- Uncontrolled shaking, also called convulsions.
- Seizures.

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Symptoms can differ from person to person. Symptoms also can differ each time a person's blood sugar becomes low. Some people don't have any symptoms that they notice. It's also possible to have no symptoms of hypoglycemia. That makes it important to check your blood sugar regularly. Also, keep track of how you feel when your blood sugar is low.

When to see a doctor

Severe hypoglycemia can lead to serious medical problems that need emergency care. These include seizures and loss of consciousness. Make sure your family, friends and co-workers know what to do in an emergency.

Teach people you trust how to recognize symptoms of hypoglycemia. If others know what symptoms to look for, they might be able to alert you to early symptoms. It's also important that family members and close friends know how to help you in case of an emergency.

For example, if you pass out due to very low blood sugar, you'll need someone to give you treatment. The treatment for severe hypoglycemia is an injection of glucagon. Glucagon is a hormone that causes the liver to release sugar into the blood. Tell family and friends where you keep glucagon and how to give it to you.

Here's some emergency information to give to others. If you're with someone who loses consciousness or can't swallow due to low blood sugar:

- Don't inject insulin. Insulin is a type of diabetes medicine that lowers blood sugar whether sugar is low or high to begin with. Injecting insulin causes blood sugar to drop even more.
- Don't give fluids or food because they could cause choking.
- Give glucagon by shot or a nasal spray.
- Call 911 or emergency services in your area for treatment right away if you suspect hypoglycemia.

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If you have symptoms of hypoglycemia several times a week, see your healthcare professional. Your treatment plan may need to be changed.

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Causes

Diabetic hypoglycemia has a number of causes. Low blood sugar is most common among people who take insulin. But low blood sugar also can happen if you use certain oral diabetes medicines, which are taken by mouth.

Common causes of diabetic hypoglycemia include:

- Taking too much insulin or other diabetes medicine.
- Not eating enough.
- Postponing or skipping a meal or snack.

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- Drinking alcohol.

Blood sugar control

Most of the body's blood sugar comes from food. The hormone insulin lowers blood sugar levels when blood sugar is too high. If you have type 1 or type 2 diabetes and need insulin to control your blood sugar, use insulin carefully. Taking more insulin than you need can cause your blood sugar level to drop too low. Hypoglycemia can happen as a result.

Your blood sugar may drop too low if you eat less than usual after you take your diabetes medicine. A drop in blood sugar also can happen if you exercise more than usual after taking your diabetes medicine. It isn't always easy to find the right balance between insulin, food and physical activity. But you can ask a member of your healthcare team to help you try to prevent low blood sugar levels. You might work with:

- Your primary care healthcare professional.
- A certified diabetes care and education specialist.
- A registered dietitian.

Risk factors

Some people have a greater risk of diabetic hypoglycemia, including:

- People who use insulin, especially those with type 1 diabetes.
- People who take diabetes medicines called sulfonylureas, such as glipizide (Glucotrol XL), glimepiride (Amaryl) or glyburide (Diabeta, Glynase).
- Young children and adults 65 and older.
- Those with conditions that affect how well the liver works or how well the kidneys work.

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