Hypoglycaemia

What is a hypo or hypoglycaemia?

This occurs when your blood glucose drops below a certain level. That level is around 4mmol/L, but different people at different times feel symptoms at different levels.

Hypos can occur for many reasons but occur most often when you are taking treatment for diabetes. They are much more common when you take insulin, but can occur if you are taking tablets for Type 2 diabetes. They are unlikely to occur when you are managing your diabetes by diet alone.

Why is it important?

It is very important to treat a hypo immediately and prevent the blood sugar dropping any lower otherwise you may have serious and even life-threatening consequences. If you feel you are having a hypo now, ingest some sugars in the form of non-diet soft drink, sugar, or jelly beans or similar food. If you are alone call for help, if none is available and the hypo is not controlled, call an Ambulance.

Severe symptoms are:

- Poor coordination
- Confusion
- Slurred speech
- Loss of consciousness
- Seizures or fitting.

Causes of hypoglycaemia

- Missing a meal or having a later than usual meal
- Not eating enough carbohydrates
- More unplanned physical activity than usual
- Alcohol – the more you drink the bigger the risk
- Too much insulin or diabetes medications

You might not be able to identify the cause so you must be aware of the symptoms.

Symptoms

Everybody reacts to hypos differently. If you are a diabetic and have any abnormal sensation consider hypos.

- Poor concentration
- Abnormal behaviour i.e. angry/agitated
- Sweating, trembling and shaking
- Light headedness and weakness
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Emotional
- Hunger
- Numbness around the lips and fingers.

How should I treat it?

Above all you must be safe. Call for help if that is available, to a family member, neighbour, or anybody if you are out and about. If you are alone and have no way of correcting the sugar level call 000. If you are in a dangerous situation such as walking in the mountains, swimming or operating a car or machinery, try and make the situation safe.

Take quick acting sugars, such as:

- Soft drinks which have sugar
- Fruit juice
- Plain sugar or honey (2-3 teaspoons)
- Lollies (chewable are best, such as jelly beans)
- Designed glucose tablets.

Don't overdo it. Have half a can of drink or one glass, 3-4 lollies not the bag and so on. If no improvement in 10 minutes, repeat and keep seeking help.

If it's a long time to your next meal, eat longer acting sugars, such as:

- Sandwiches
- Milk or soy milk (one glass)
- Fruit.

Hypo unawareness

Some diabetics, especially long term diabetics, will show no symptoms of hypoglycaemia. They may lose consciousness without ever presenting any symptoms. If this happens you should tell your family and friends and check your blood glucose levels more often. This should be done in consultation with your diabetic clinicians.

What do I do if I find an unconscious diabetic?

THIS IS AN EMERGENCY. Do not try to feed them. If you know Basic Life Support check for cardiac arrest.

What next:

- Roll them onto their side with their mouth facing downwards to allow vomit or food to come out. Are they breathing out?
- Give an injection of Glucagon if available and you are trained to give it.
- Dial 000 and use the word 'unconscious' and 'diabetic emergency'.
- Stay with the patient.
- If the patient regains consciousness, give sugars as outlined above.

Prevention

There are a number of things that you can do to manage and avoid hypoglycaemia including:

- Carry a rescue pack of sugars, lollies or glucose tablets,, in your bag, pocket and car.
- Wear an alert bracelet stating that you are a diabetic.
- Monitor your sugars and note hypos and discuss these with your diabetic clinicians.
- Make sure friends, family and co-workers are aware you are a diabetic and how to treat you.
- If you do drink alcohol ensure you also eat carbohydrates.

Diabetes Australia have produced a guide for what contents to include in a good 'hypo pack'. A hypo pack is a pack for treating episodes of hypoglycaemia.

Hypo pack contents may include:

- The name of the person it belongs to
- List of contents
- Written descriptions of hypo symptoms
- Instructions for how to treat a hypo (in case friends and family need to treat)
- Fast—acting carbohydrates such as juice or jelly beans
- Slow—acting carbohydrate such as muesli bars, fruit bars and biscuits
- Doctors and hospital contact numbers
- Emergency contact details, such as your nearest relative.