

What is a hypo?

This guide aims to answer some of the common questions people ask about hypoglycaemia, often referred to as a 'hypo'. It is intended to support the advice of your doctor or nurse. If you have any worries or concerns, please let them know and they will be able to help.

What is a hypo?

The concentration of sugar (glucose) in your blood is measured in millimoles per litre of blood (mmol/L). Normally, your blood glucose level should be between 4–7 mmol/L at a time when you're fasting – say just before breakfast. If it falls below this level, you may start to feel unwell. This is known as hypoglycaemia or a 'hypo'.

A hypo can easily be corrected, but it is important that you act quickly. Left untreated, a hypo could make you lose consciousness.

Good blood glucose control: Between 4–7 mmol/L

Low blood glucose – risk of a 'hypo': Below 4 mmol/L

What causes a hypo?

Hypos can occur for various reasons. Usually, it is because the balance between your food intake and level of activity has been upset. Sometimes, this may be because you have been more active than you were expecting, such as running for the bus. Other times, you may have a hypo because you have not had enough to eat, or because you have eaten later than you intended.

Some hypos can be avoided by changing your food or medication to match your level of activity. It will help if you learn to recognise the causes and early signs of a hypo and how to avoid them.

Things that could cause a hypo:

- Missing or delaying a meal
- Exercising or being more active without having extra snacks or reducing your tablets/increasing your insulin
- Too high a dose of tablets or insulin
- Certain illnesses – particularly infections, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Alcohol
- Sexual activity
- Hot weather
- Some medicines*

*Your doctor or nurse will be able to advise you which medicines can cause a hypo.

In some cases, there may be no obvious explanation. Try to think if you have done anything different during the day. This may help you to work out the reason and avoid another hypo in the future. However, you may not always be able to tell what has caused a hypo.

How will a hypo make me feel?

You may find that hypos affect the way you feel in various ways, but you will gradually start to recognise some of the symptoms. The early warnings may not be the same every time nor the same for everyone, so you will need to look out for your own early warning signals.

Some warning signs of a hypo:

- Sweating heavily
- Feeling anxious or excited
- Feeling very tired, or not being bothered to do anything
- Being dizzy or shaky
- Rapid heart beat or palpitations
- Feeling hungry
- Feeling nauseous or being sick
- Headache
- Tingling around your mouth
- Blurred vision

These can all be early signals that your blood glucose level has fallen too low. As soon as you notice the warnings of a hypo, it is very important that you take some sugar quickly to get your blood glucose level back to normal.

Don't delay – if you think you are having a hypo, have a sugary drink or some glucose tablets immediately.

When a hypo happens

A hypo, in itself, can make it more difficult for you to recognise the early symptoms.

It may help if your family and friends know what to look for, so that they can start to recognise the signs of a hypo too.

If someone else thinks you are having a hypo, you need to listen to them.

Signs to look for in others:

- Pale face
- Confusion
- Aggression
- Lack of concentration
- Agitation
- Appearing drunk
- Forgetfulness

A hypo must be treated quickly, so telling other people what to look out for can help you or them to act rapidly. If you are employed, you might want to tell your colleagues what to look for.

It's also a good idea to carry a medical ID card which says that you have diabetes and how your diabetes is treated, so that other people are aware of this if you have a hypo.

Make sure people can tell if you are having a hypo.

What should I do?

If you think you are having a hypo, it is important to increase your blood glucose level straight away.

A drink high in sugar is a good way to do this, as it will increase your blood glucose level quickly. Choose something you like the taste of – such as fruit juice or a fizzy soft drink – but NOT the diet or sugar-free varieties.

If you cannot have a drink, you could take 3–5 glucose tablets.

What should I do if I am having a hypo?

- Drink or eat something that contains a lot of sugar. You could have a sugary, fizzy drink like cola or lemonade (but NOT the diet varieties) or glucose tablets
- If you don't feel any better after 5 minutes, have some more sugar
- Try to check your blood glucose level
- When you start to feel better, have something to eat that is high in carbohydrate (starch), such as a sandwich or an apple

If you are unsure whether you are having a hypo, you may want to test your blood glucose level. However, don't wait to do this if you can't do it immediately, have some sugar first. When you feel better after your blood glucose level has come back up again, be sure to eat some starchy food such as toast or a sandwich.

Making sure someone else knows what to do

Sometimes, you may not be able to tell that you are having a hypo. It is important that your family, friends and work colleagues know what to do in this situation.

If someone else notices that you are having a hypo, they should give you a sugary drink. You may be confused by the hypo and think that you do not need a sugary drink. It is important that they know they need to insist.

What if I am unconscious?

You should not be given anything to eat or drink if you are unconscious, as you could choke. An ambulance should be called at once.

Your doctor or nurse may give you a glucagon injection.

Glucagon is a hormone that increases the level of glucose in your blood. If you carry a glucagon injection device, you should make sure that your family, friends and colleagues know how to use it in case you have a hypo.

Make sure other people – family, friends and work colleagues – know what to do if you are having a hypo.

How can I reduce the chances of a hypo?

There are several ways in which you can try to prevent hypos. You will gradually learn which ones work best for you.

Tips to prevent hypos:

- Learn to recognise your own hypo symptoms
- Eat extra snacks or reduce your tablets/insulin if you are increasing your level of activity
- Check your blood glucose level regularly each day
- Plan ahead

If you do have a hypo, try to work out afterwards what caused it. If you start to have a lot of hypos, you should speak to your doctor or nurse, as you may need to change your treatment.

Driving and hypos

If you are driving and you think you may be having a hypo:

- Find a safe place to stop as quickly as possible
- Take the keys out of the ignition and move into the passenger seat

- Take some sugar straight away – such as a sugary drink or glucose tablets
- Have a starchy snack, such as fruit, a biscuit or a sandwich to keep your blood glucose level up
- Now check your blood glucose level
- Only carry on driving when you feel better and have tested your blood glucose level and know it is above 4 mmol/L

Do not drive if you are unable to recognise the early warning signs of a hypo.

You should not drive in any of these situations:

- You are unable to recognise the early signs of a hypo
- You have trouble with your eyesight that cannot be corrected with glasses
- You have weakness or numbness in your arms or legs
- You are under the influence of alcohol
- Your blood glucose level is low

If you develop health problems that may affect your ability to drive, such as difficulties with your vision, you must tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

If you have a driving licence and take medication to control your diabetes, you should check the website below: www.gov.uk/diabetes-driving

You must, by law, inform your car insurance company if you have diabetes treated with insulin or tablets.

Helpful words

Blood glucose level	The amount of sugar in your blood
Glucose	Sugar – the form in which food can be used as fuel by the body
Hypoglycaemia	Low level of glucose in your blood, commonly known as a 'hypo'
Insulin	Hormone produced during digestion, to lower blood glucose

My contacts

Diabetes nurse

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Diabetes specialist doctor

Name: _____

Tel: _____

GP

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Dietician

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Chiropodist/Podiatrist

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Community nurse

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Pharmacist

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Other

Name: _____

Tel: _____

Some contacts you might find useful

Diabetes UK

www.diabetes.org.uk

Tel: 0845 120 2960

Driving with diabetes

DVLA

www.gov.uk/diabetes-driving

Tel: 0300 790 6806

Healthy living

NHS support in giving up smoking

www.smokefree.nhs.uk

Tel: 0800 022 4332

This fact sheet is part of a series that helps to provide information about diabetes. Each of these fact sheets can be downloaded from www.diabetesmatters.co.uk and pre-printed booklets may be ordered from the website, or your doctor or nurse might have copies to give to you.

www.diabetesmatters.co.uk

Freephone 24-hour Sanofi Diabetes care-line

08000 35 25 25

Sanofi, One Onslow Street, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4YS