

Department of Nutrition and Dietetics

Paediatric Diabetes: Alcohol and type 1 Diabetes advice for adolescents

Main points:

- **Alcohol increases the risk of hypoglycaemia** during the night and next morning, even if your blood glucose levels are high before bed.
- **Do not give insulin with alcohol, and make sure to eat carbohydrates before, after and the next morning.**
- Alcohol also dehydrates your body, so make sure to **alternate alcoholic drinks with sugar-free and alcohol-free fluids.**
- As it takes 1 hour for your body to process 1 unit of alcohol, try not to exceed 1 alcoholic drink per hour.
- Alcohol will affect your mood and your blood glucose levels, so ensure you are **monitoring your blood glucose levels** regularly throughout the night and next morning.
- Keep your alcohol intake to a small amount the first time you drink when you go out with friends, so you have an idea of how to manage things.
- Make sure to **carry a medical ID and inform accompanying friends that you have type 1 diabetes.** Carry hypo treatment and glucose meter with you.
- Ask someone to check on you in the morning and possibly overnight (particularly if you are not fully hypoaware).

Alcohol increases risk of hypoglycaemia

Usually, if your blood glucose levels drop too low in the night, your body will release some glucose from its stores (in the liver) to maintain the level. Alcohol dulls your own body's response to night time hypoglycaemia, which can stop your body pushing out its own glucose stores. This is because the liver is processing the alcohol and the result can be very dangerous.

Safety

If it is the first time you have had alcohol, we would encourage you to try it at home, with your family or friends, so that you have an idea of how it affects you, while you are in a safe place.



Patient Information

The signs of being hypoglycaemic can easily be confused, with being drunk (e.g. confusion, slurred speech). It is important to wear some form of identification that tells others that you have type 1 diabetes.

Make sure someone is expecting you back that evening and that you have an emergency number (In Case of Emergency – ICE) on the front screen of your mobile that can be called, if you are found unwell and are not able to say you have type 1 diabetes.

Ask somebody to check on you in the morning, to see how you are feeling. You should check your blood glucose levels as early as you can.



How much is too much?

Alcohol is a toxin for the body, and for people with diabetes as for the general population **there is no safe amount of alcohol.**

For both men and women, the recommendation is **not to exceed 14 units of alcohol per week**, whilst **ensuring at least 2 alcohol-free days per week**. Remember in some bars, measures of spirits are often more than 1 unit.

If you are under 18 it is illegal to buy alcohol and/or drink in a public place.

What does a unit of alcohol look like?

1 unit of alcohol =



½ pint of ordinary strength beer or lager

or



One 25ml pub measure of spirits

2 units of alcohol =



One 175ml glass of wine (12%)

or



One bottle of strong beer, lager, cider or alco pops

Patient Information

Carbohydrate in drinks

Some alcoholic drinks contain carbohydrate, normally sugar. Sugar is used to make alcohol, but often not all of it is converted to alcohol.

- Drinks such as beer and cider contain a lot of sugar, but this is not written on the label as there is no legal requirement for drink manufacturers to share this information.
- Spirits such as vodka or whisky do not contain much carbohydrate but if you mix them with a full sugar mixer or fruit juice, there will be sugar in those
- As alcohol consumption increases the risk of hypoglycaemia, **do not give insulin with alcoholic drinks**. However, **try to avoid alcoholic drinks or mixers high in sugar**, as these may not necessarily counteract the hypoglycaemic risk but they may increase the risk of DKA.

Check your blood glucose levels regularly during the evening



Example Plan

The most sensible approach to managing an evening drinking alcohol may be to do the following:

- **Eat before you drink**– Eat before you start drinking and give your usual dose of insulin. Aim for a balanced meal containing protein as well as carbohydrate.
- **Long-acting insulin** - Consider taking this earlier than usual so that you remember to do the injection. Reduce the amount by 30 – 50% depending on how much you are going to be drinking.
- **Low carb drinks** – Choose alcohol that is low in carbohydrates so this will not raise your blood glucose levels too much during the course of the evening.
- **Alternate alcoholic drinks with water**– Stay hydrated and minimise hangover symptoms by alternating alcoholic drinks with sugar and alcohol-free drinks such as water, soda water and lemon or sugar-free squash
- **Bed time snack** – If BG is 4 – 10mmol/l, have a snack before bed that contains around **30g of carbohydrate without insulin** to prevent night time low blood glucose levels. If your blood glucose levels are higher than 14, consider giving **half** of your usual dose of insulin but **no insulin if they are lower than this**.
 - If you have an insulin pump, try a temporary overnight basal rate of 50%.

Patient Information

- **Next morning-** Make sure to have some carbs to eat when you wake, even if you don't feel like it. Your blood glucose levels may remain low for up to 24 hours after drinking alcohol so be aware that the following day you may need to also reduce the bolus insulin (Novorapid) you usually have with meals.

Dancing and Sex are both activities that will use up glucose. If you combine these with alcohol, the risk of low blood glucose levels is even higher. You may need to take more glucose (Glucotabs or Sweets) if these activities are part of your evening or reduce the insulin you have with food or as a correction.

If you know you will be drinking, let your diabetes team know ahead of time as they can advise on a plan tailored to your specific needs and preferences.

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