Patient Information

University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust

Nutrition and Dietetics

Diabetes - Low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia)

What is hypoglycaemia?

Hypoglycaemia or a ‘hypo’ is where the level of sugar (glucose) in your blood drops too low. A blood sugar level of **below 4.0 mmol/L** is the beginning of a hypo. Some people may experience hypoglycaemic symptoms at higher blood sugar levels. This should be discussed with your diabetes nurse.

What are the signs?

Low blood sugar has a different effect on everyone. The signs and symptoms can include:

- Hunger
- Irritability
- Blurred vision
- Trembling or dizziness
- Feeling drowsy
- Sweating heavily
- Tingling of the lips
- Difficulty concentrating
- Slurred speech
- Looking pale

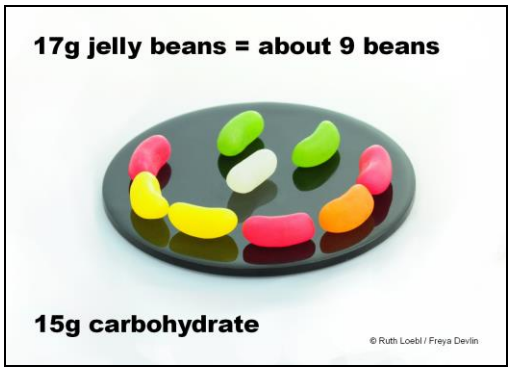
If left untreated, a severe hypo can lead to unconsciousness. If you are unable to wake up a person with diabetes, call 999 immediately.

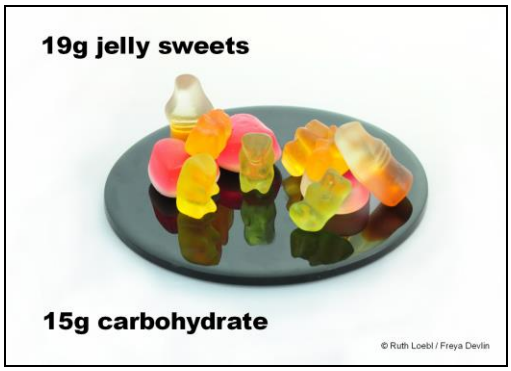
How to treat your low blood sugar level

At the first signs of a hypo, you should test your blood sugar level to confirm hypoglycaemia.

If your blood sugar level is below 4.0 mmol/L, **have 15-20g of a fast-acting carbohydrate**. This could be one of the following:

- 4-5 glucose/dextrose tablets, such as GlucoTabs or Dextro Energy
- A glass of Lucozade Energy (200ml) (Other versions of Lucozade contain less)
- A glass of ordinary (not diet) fizzy drink. Check the amount of carbohydrate per 100ml as these vary. You often need more than 200ml
- A glass of smooth orange, pineapple or apple juice (200ml)
- Sweets: 4-5 jelly babies, or 8- 10 jellybeans, 5-6 wine gums or fruit pastilles
- Lift GlucoJuice – 60ml bottle, contains 15g carbohydrates
- Lift chewable tablets – 5 tablets, contain 18.5g carbohydrates

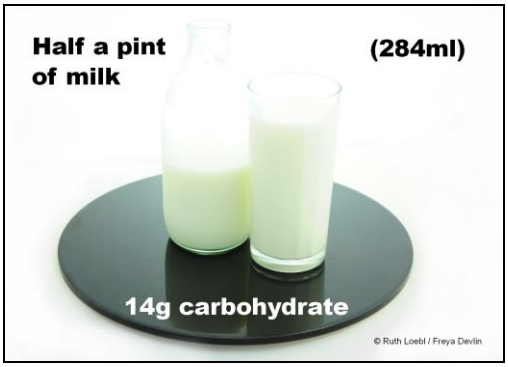


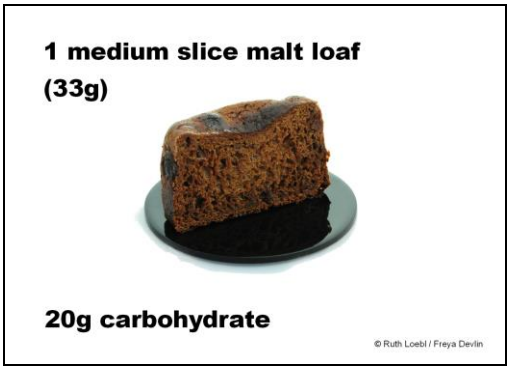


Wait 10-15 minutes and re-test your blood sugar level. If your level is still low, take another 15-20g fast-acting carbohydrate and re-test after another 10-15 minutes. If your level is 4.0 mmol/L or higher, you should then eat some longer-acting carbohydrate.

If it is not a mealtime, **have a snack of 15-20g of longer-acting carbohydrate** to make sure your blood sugar level does not drop again before your next meal. This could be one of the following:

- A small banana
- A slice of bread or toast
- A pot of yogurt
- A small bowl of breakfast cereal
- A glass of milk (half a pint)
- A medium slice of malt loaf
- Two digestive biscuits
- A two-finger wafer bar or a fun-size chocolate bar





If your hypo is just before a meal, then you should treat the hypo with fast-acting carbohydrate before eating. Your meal should contain starchy carbohydrate, for example, bread, pasta, potato, or rice.

If you are counting carbohydrates you may be able to reduce the insulin you have calculated for your meal by 1-2 units instead of eating extra longer-acting carbohydrate. You may also choose to inject your insulin after eating instead of beforehand. Ask your Diabetes Specialist Dietitian or Nurse for more guidance on this.

Precautions you can take

- Always carry fast-acting hypo treatments and starchy snacks, especially if you are driving. Always test your blood sugar levels before driving.
- Wear or carry a diabetes identification bracelet, necklace or card – available from Diabetes UK and other suppliers.
- Tell people about your diabetes and the signs of hypoglycaemia. The more aware people are, the more likely they will spot the signs and be able to help you treat your hypo before you need medical assistance.

What causes a low blood sugar level?

Generally, most people can think back after a hypo and identify why it happened.

- Took too much insulin or diabetes tablets?
- Delayed or missed a meal?
- Didn't eat enough starchy food?
- More active than usual without having snacks?
- Drinking too much alcohol or drinking alcohol without food?

Once you know the reason why you had a hypo, try to prevent it happening again. If you continue to have hypos at certain times, you might need to alter your insulin dose or have an extra snack between meals. If you continue to have hypos and you can see no reason why your blood sugar is running low, then you should speak to your diabetes specialist dietitian, nurse or doctor.

Night-time hypoglycaemia

Sometimes your blood sugar level can drop during the night. Often you will wake up and will need to treat the hypo as if it were any other time of day. If the hypo is mild, it might not wake you up, but you may feel very tired next morning or have a headache.

If you suspect that you are having regular night-time hypos, the best way to confirm the situation is to test your blood sugar on a number of different occasions at bedtime, during the night, and when you wake up. Your diabetes team can advise you of the most suitable time during the night, and they can also help you to interpret the results.

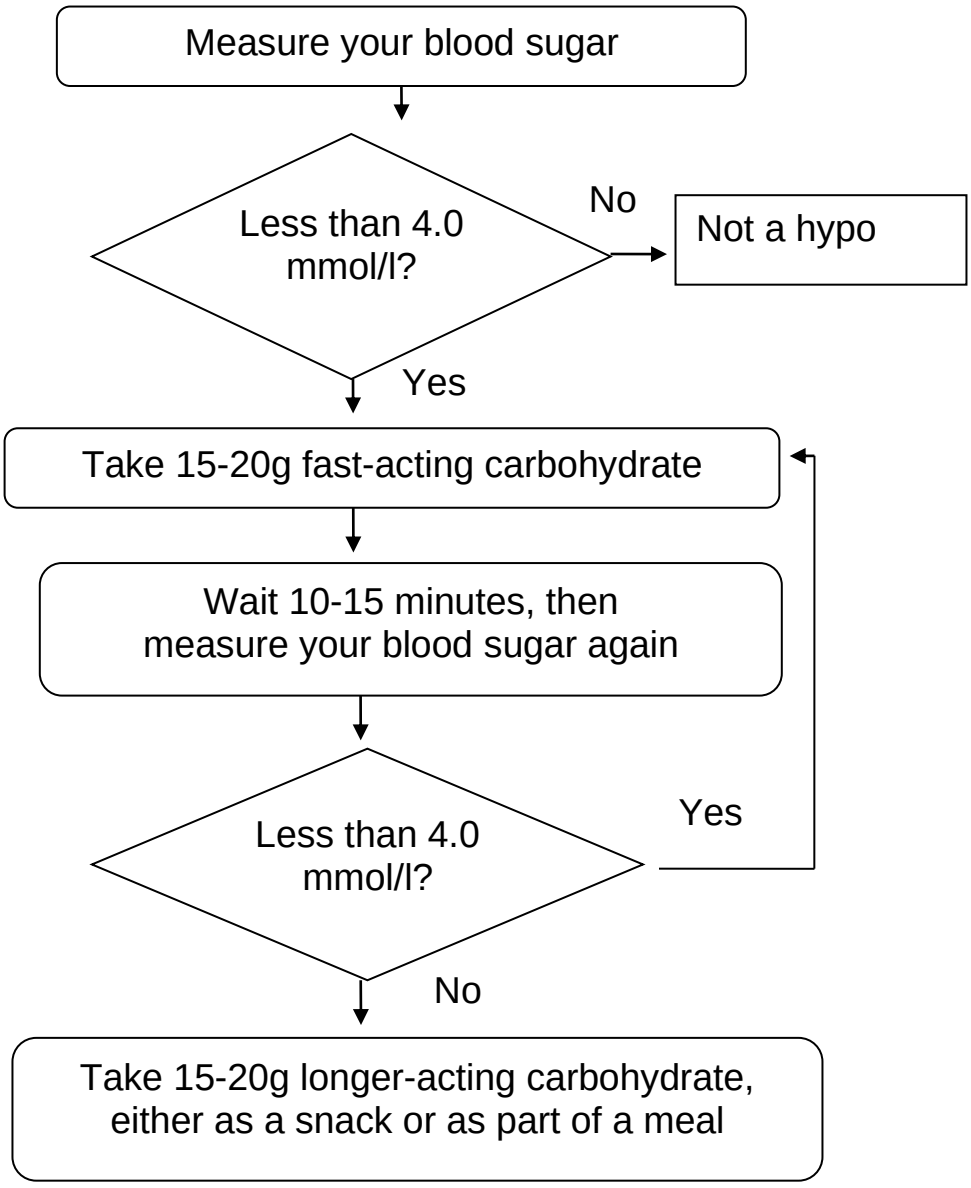
Hypoglycaemia and driving

It is your responsibility to make sure that you are safe to drive. If you do not follow the guidance provided by the DVLA, you may lose your driving licence. If you drive while having a hypo or when at risk of having a hypo, you are putting yourself and others in danger. This advice applies to all those on insulin or other medication that carries a risk of causing hypos, such as sulphonylureas (Gliclazide and Glimepiride are two examples of this type of medication).

- Check your blood sugar before driving and every 2 hours while driving.
- **Do not drive if your blood sugar level is below 5.0 mmol/L.**
- Always keep hypo treatments (fast-acting and longer-acting carbohydrate) in the car.

If you feel as though you might be having a hypo while driving, stop the car safely as soon as possible. Turn off the engine, remove the keys from the ignition, and move into the passenger seat. Test your blood sugar level and treat any hypo. You must wait for 45 minutes after your blood sugar is back to normal before you start driving again.

If you feel like you might be having a hypo, never ignore the warning signs.



Listeriosis risk: foods to avoid

Avoid ready-to-eat cold smoked or cured fish products such as smoked salmon or gravlax due to an increased risk from listeriosis. Listeriosis is an infection caused by bacteria called listeria. People with diabetes are at higher risk of serious illness from listeriosis. Further information on how to reduce the risk of listeriosis can be found at:

- NHS www.nhs.uk/conditions/listeriosis
- Food Standards Agency www.food.gov.uk/listeria

Further information

This leaflet was produced by the Coventry and Rugby Dietitians. If you have any other questions or would like some more information, please contact 024 7696 6161.

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