University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust

Patient Information

Nutrition and Dietetics

Paediatric diabetes - Alcohol and type 1 diabetes advice for adolescents

- **Alcohol increases the risk of hypoglycaemia** during the night and the **next morning, even if your blood glucose levels are high before bed.**
- Do not give insulin with alcohol unless a tailored plan has been agreed with your diabetes team.
- Make sure to eat carbohydrates before, after and the next morning.
- **Alcohol also dehydrates your body, so 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 make sure you **monitor your blood glucose levels 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.
- **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 the risk of hypoglycaemia

Usually, if your blood glucose levels drop too low at night, your body will release some glucose from its stores (in the liver) to maintain the level. Alcohol dulls your body's response to nighttime hypoglycaemia, which can stop your body from 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's the first time you've had alcohol, we encourage you to try it at home, with your family or friends. This is so you can know how alcohol affects you while you're in a safe place.

The signs of being hypoglycaemic can easily be confused with being drunk (confusion, slurred speech). It's important to wear some form of identification that tells others 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 feel. 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, and 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 **having 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?

Carbohydrate in drinks

Some alcoholic drinks contain carbohydrates, 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. This is not written on the label as there is no legal requirement for drink manufacturers to share this information.
- Spirits like 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.
- Try to avoid alcoholic drinks or mixers high in sugar. These may not counteract the hypoglycaemic risk but may increase the risk of DKA.
- As alcohol consumption increases the risk of hypoglycaemia, we generally advise against counting the carbohydrate in alcohol. Everyone responds to alcohol differently, speak to your diabetes team for advice.

Check your blood glucose levels regularly during the evening

Example plan

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

- **Eat before you drink**: Eat before you start drinking and give your usual insulin dose. 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.
- **Low-carb drinks**: Choose alcohol that is low in carbohydrates so this will not raise your blood glucose levels too much during 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.
- **Bedtime snack:** If blood glucose is in target before bed, have a small snack. This may need to be approximately 30g carbohydrate, but your individual needs will differ. Speak to your dietitian about snack size.
    - If you have an insulin pump, try a temporary overnight basal rate, or increase your target rate.

- **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 or Fiasp) 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. If these activities are part of your evening, you may need to take more glucose (Glucotabs or Sweets) 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.

Produced by Coventry and Rugby Paediatric Dietitians, University Hospitals Coventry & Warwickshire NHS Trust.

Contact number: 024 7696 6161

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