# How to Avoid Hypoglycemia

Expert Reviewed

Three Methods:

Assessing your Risk

Adjusting your Lifestyle

Changing your Die

Hypoglycemia occurs when blood sugar dips too low. After consuming foods and drinks that are high in sugar, your blood glucose first skyrockets and then dips down, giving you that infamous "crash" feeling. Mild to moderate hypoglycemia may induce feelings of discomfort such as hunger, shakiness, and dizziness, but severe hypoglycemia can cause life-threatening seizures. If you believe you are at risk of hypoglycemia, there are ways to avoid and reduce the risk.

#### Method 1

# **Assessing your Risk**

Watch for symptoms. The best way to prevent hypoglycemia to know what to look for. While hypoglycemia is often associated with diabetes, hypoglycemic symptoms can be triggered by missing meals, increasing your physical activity, or drinking too much alcohol. [1] Symptoms can appear up to 24 hours following these activities. Symptoms include:

- Hunger
- Shakiness
- Anxiety
- Sweating
- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness
- Fatigue
- · Physical weakness
- Convulsions

**2** Differentiate between functional and reactive hypoglycemia. If you can determine if you are functional or reactive, you can better avoid hypoglycemia. Functional hypoglycemia occurs if there is abnormal glucose regulation in your body; the source of this dysfunction may not be known. Reactive hypoglycemia occurs as a response to your diet or stress. [2] Functional hypoglycemia can be controlled by medication whereas reactive hypoglycemia can be prevented by changes in diet or lifestyle.

**Read the labels of your medication.** Some medicines can trigger hypoglycemia, including insulin injections, certain antidepressants, and malaria drugs.<sup>[3]</sup> Research your medication for potential side effects and speak with your doctor to understand your risk.

Take a glucose tolerance test. If you are at risk for diabetes or suspect you have a different hypoglycemic condition, you may ask your doctor for a glucose tolerance test (GTT). You may be asked to fast for 8 hours before a blood sample is drawn and tested. Urine tests can also be used to detect glucose-related conditions.<sup>[4]</sup>

**5 Keep track of what you eat.** For ten days, record everything you eat and drink (including medication) as well as what time of day you consume them. As you go about your day, record the time and severity of any hypoglycemic symptoms you may feel. If you notice that you are repeatedly suffering symptoms or crashes after consuming a particular food or drink, eliminate that item from your diet for a few days and see if you improve. If you suspect your medication is responsible, consult your doctor for advice but do not stop taking it until you are advised to do so. [5]

**See a doctor.** If you have more than one hypoglycemic episode a week, you may want to see a doctor for testing or medication. Furthermore, if you suddenly suffer from poor coordination, blurred vision, or slurred speech, you may be on the verge of a severe hypoglycemic episode. Seek emergency treatment at a hospital. Severe hypoglycemia can cause fainting and seizures as well as life-threatening damage to your heart and brain.<sup>[6]</sup>

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## Method 2

## **Adjusting your Lifestyle**

- Reduce stress. Stress-related hormones such as epinephrine play a significant role in the production and regulation of glucose. [7] If you can identify your major stressors, you can take steps to reduce stress in your life and decrease your risk of hypoglycemia. There are a few common tactics for dealing with stress.
  - Write down what stresses you throughout the day. This will help you identify what is causing your stress as well
    as what you can do to deal with it in a healthy manner.
  - Get plenty of sleep. A full night's rest can reduce the stress you feel the following day. Maintain a healthy and consistent sleeping schedule.
  - Exercise. Even taking a short walk every day will help you relax.
  - Talk it out. Discussing what bothers you with a close friend or family member can provide you with assistance and support. Your problems will not be your burden alone.<sup>[8]</sup>
- **2** Exercise moderately. Blood sugar levels can plummet after intense exercise, but this does not mean that you should stop entirely. Exercise has many other health benefits, and you can moderate your exercise with certain practices to reduce the risk of hypoglycemia.
  - Eat a snack before and after you exercise. This will prevent your blood sugar levels from dropping too severely.
     Check your blood sugar during extended periods of exercise and have small snacks as a necessary, especially if your blood sugar is less than 100 mg/dl.<sup>[9]</sup>
  - Do not exercise late at night. Have your session be at least two hours before you go to bed.
  - Do not exercise more than once or twice a day.
  - If you take insulin injections, do not exercise when your insulin levels are at their highest.<sup>[10]</sup> Even after exercise, when you are recovering, medication may cause your blood glucose to spike. Check your levels periodically after exercise.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Reduce alcohol and caffeine consumption. Alcohol and coffee can be difficult to eliminate because they are social drinks, but they are also major catalysts for hypoglycemia. As many as one-fifth of severe hypoglycemic episodes are caused by alcohol.<sup>[12]</sup> If you are finding it difficult to eliminate alcohol and caffeine completely, only consume them in social settings and limit yourself to one drink.
  - Alcohol, especially on an empty stomach, can lead to hypoglycemia, and can have lasting effects even one to
    two days after consumption. Heavy drinking is particularly dangerous. Make sure you're not drinking on an
    empty stomach have a small snack if necessary.<sup>[13]</sup>
- Lose excess weight. Being overweight often leads to diabetes, and the first step to pre-diabetes is reactive hypoglycemia. If you can prevent hypoglycemia by losing weight and controlling your diet, you will decrease your chances of developing diabetes.
  - According to the Diabetes Prevention Program, even a modest decrease in weight around 7% of total body weight — greatly decreases your risk of developing diabetes.<sup>[14]</sup>
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking significantly increases your odds of suffering severe hypoglycemia. [15] Wean yourself off tobacco to improve your general health and increase your odds of avoiding hypoglycemia.
- **6 Keep glucose tablets on hand.** Glucose tablets are available to boost your blood sugar levels in case of emergency. There are many over-the-counter options available. Ask your local pharmacist for recommendations. You can take three or four at a time depending on the dosage. [16]

# Method 3

### **Changing your Diet**

Schedule your meals at regular intervals. Infrequent or sporadic eating can induce hypoglycemia. It is recommended that you either eat six small meals a day or eat three big meals with small snacks in between. [17] A good schedule will keep your glucose levels consistent while helping you monitor when and what you eat.

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Reduce your intake of simple carbohydrates. These are foods that have a simple molecular structure that is broken down very quickly and turned into glucose in the body, causing your blood sugar to rise. Simple carbohydrates include table sugar, high fructose corn syrup and honey. Foods with simple carbs include fruit, milk, candy, soda and confections like cakes and cookies. These sugars cause high spikes in blood sugar that can result in rebound hypoglycemia. Try to avoid these as much as possible. [18]

**3** Eat a limited amount of complex carbohydrates. These foods are made up of multiple chains of simple sugars so they don't break down as quickly as simple carbs. Complex carbs include potatoes, pasta, grains and breads. Opting for whole wheat and whole grain versions of breads and pastas will help reduce hypoglycemia, since these break down slowly. High fiber carbs can help regulate your blood sugar.<sup>[19]</sup>

**Balance complex carbs with protein and fat.** Each meal should include one source of complex carbs, one source of fat, and one source of protein. Complex carbs will slowly release glucose over a period of time in your body, while the protein and fat will slow your body's processing of glucose and keep blood sugar levels stable. [20] Meal and snack options that fit these proportions include:

- · Meat or cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread
- Peanut butter on whole grain crackers
- Salad with raw vegetables, beans, and a dairy-free dressing
- · Hard-boiled egg with carrot sticks or celery
- Lean meat or fish served with quinoa and a vegetable

**5 Keep non-perishable snacks on hand.** It will be easier for you to maintain healthy eating practices if you keep your home, office, purse, and car stocked with prepared snacks and foods. It is recommended to keep 15 grams of carbohydrates on you at all times in case of emergency. [21] If you are unable to have a proper meal at your scheduled time or if you feel the onset of a hypoglycemic episode, these snacks can stave off hypoglycemia until you are able to eat. Examples of non-perishable snacks include:

- One 4-ounce glass of juice
- · A small box of raisins
- · A granola bar
- · One piece of hard candy

#### **Tips**

- Take all medications as prescribed. If you're on a medication to help control your blood sugar levels, talk to your doctor before making any alterations, especially if you have lost weight or changed your diet. Do not stop taking a medication unless your doctor advises you to do so.
- Even if you are not diabetic, hypoglycemia can be a sign of a number of conditions including liver, pancreas or kidney
  disease. It can also be a byproduct of stomach surgery or a genetic metabolic condition. If you are frequently experiencing
  hypoglycemic episodes, consult a doctor in case it is a sign of a more serious condition.
- Watch your fruit intake. Fruit has both high levels of fiber and of sugar. You may need to reduce the amount of fruit you are eating or eliminate it entirely. Ask your doctor if fruit is safe to eat with your medical conditions. [22]
- Do not cut all bad foods at once. Gradually reduce offending foods from your diet until you are off them entirely. [23]

#### Warnings

- Avoid bleached flour and sugar as much as possible. Extra refinement often takes out the good nutrients, leaving you with simple carbohydrates that can lead to a blood sugar spike and subsequent hypoglycemia.
- Avoid alcohol as much as possible. Alcohol has sugar in it and can lead to a sugar crash.

#### Sources and Citations

 $\textbf{1.}\ http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-topics/Diabetes/hypoglycemia/Pages/index.aspx$ 

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- 2. http://hypoglycemia.org/about-hsf/faq/
- 3. http://www.med.umich.edu/intmed/endocrinology/patients/Hypoglycemia.htm

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