Diabetic Hypoglycemia: Recognizing Common Symptoms and Managing a Hypoglycemic Event

Hypoglycemia, abnormally low blood glucose/blood sugar levels, is a medical emergency that requires immediate recognition and treatment or it can be dangerous. Do you know the symptoms of hypoglycemia? The American Diabetes Association (ADA) has a great list to look at on their website (www.diabetes.org) and we have provided some of the more common symptoms of hypoglycemia in the blue box below.

The challenge with hypoglycemia is that the symptoms may be subtle at first and therefore not quickly recognized, or perhaps even ignored. However, if neglected, this may lead to a worsening condition that could result in an emergency room visit or hospitalization.

So, what can we do about this?

1. First, educate staff members on the symptoms of hypoglycemia so they are quick to recognize potential hypoglycemic events.

2. Educate patients on the symptoms of hypoglycemia so they can intervene with a snack and prevent further problems.

3. Share the “15–15” rule. When someone with diabetes has a low blood glucose level (under 70 mg/dl or when signs or symptoms of hypoglycemia are present), the ADA recommends following the "15–15" rule: Eat or drink something containing 15 grams of carbohydrate, wait 15 minutes, and test your blood sugar again. If still low, repeat the process.¹

4. Share the Snack Cheat Sheet with the patient (back side of this page) so they can quickly recall what is a “good” snack to eat during this time. Because confusion and impatience are symptoms of hypoglycemia, a patient may not grab the right food for a snack. Help take the guessing out of this process and make it safe.

5. Point out the grocery shopping list (back side of this page) to the patient so they can always have these food items on hand.

The 30-day readmission rate for patients on a diabetic medication is 22.75 percent, compared to the all-cause readmission rate of 18.81 percent. This demonstrates the significant readmission risk that is present for diabetics.²

Symptoms of Hypoglycemia

- Shakiness
- Nervousness or anxiety
- Sweating, chills, and clamminess
- Irritability or impatience
- Confusion
- Rapid/fast heartbeat
- Light-headedness or dizziness
- Hunger and nausea
- Color draining from the skin (pallor)

For additional information on this and other High-Risk Medication Resource of the Month documents, go to: https://www.hsag.com/med-management-resources

¹. American Diabetes Association, Diabetes Symptoms, Diabetes Forecast Magazine: July 2013: Coping With Hypoglycemia as a Caregiver, Lindsey Wahowiak
². Data files provided to Health Services Advisory Group (HSAG) by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) April 2016–March 2017. The data files include Part-A and Part-D claims for Medicare Fee-for-Service beneficiaries.

This material was prepared by Health Services Advisory Group, the Medicare Quality Improvement Organization for California, under contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The contents presented do not necessarily reflect CMS policy. Publication No. CA-115DW-C-3.6-11062017-02
Are you feeling jittery, dizzy, sweaty, or confused?

Grab one of these snacks, because you may be at the start of a hypoglycemia event.

1. Choose one of the snacks in the pictures below and eat. It should be something containing 15 grams of carbohydrate.
2. Wait 15 minutes and test your blood sugar again. If it is still low, repeat the process.
3. Do not worry if it is close to snack or meal times. Some experts suggest that the carbs used to treat low blood sugar should be seen as medicine. Do not skip a meal after a low blood sugar reading.
4. Consider eating a snack of complex carbohydrate such as cheese and crackers, or half a sandwich to help ensure that your blood sugar will not drop again.³

Choose one of these snacks to ward off a hypoglycemic event

**Hard candy** is a good snack to grab if you are starting to experience hypoglycemic symptoms. Examples: gum drops, butterscotch drops, jellybeans, starburst, etc. Regardless of the kind of candy, make sure you read the food label and know in advance how many you to need to eat to have 15 grams of carbohydrates.

*Source: American Diabetes Association*

**Regular soda** (not diet) 4–6 oz., is recommended. In the grocery store soda is usually sold in boxes of 12 oz. cans. When you are starting to feel your symptoms make sure you drink no more than half of a 12 oz. can of regular soda.

*Source: American Diabetes Association*

**1 small apple.** Three sizes of apples are sold at most grocery stores: small, regular, and large. Make sure that you purchase the apples that are labeled small—they are the same price or sometimes even a little cheaper than regular size apples. The type of apple (Red Delicious, Granny Smith, etc.) does not matter. *Source: University of California San Francisco Medical Center*

**Raisins,** 2 tablespoons (about the size of a golf ball).

*Source: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease*

**Honey,** 1 tablespoon.

*Source: American Diabetes Association*

My Grocery List of Snacks

- Hard candy of your choice
- Small can of regular soda (NOT diet)
- Small apple
- Raisins
- Honey

Helpful Websites

- [https://professional.diabetes.org/pel/hypoglycemia-english](https://professional.diabetes.org/pel/hypoglycemia-english)
- [https://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/treating_low_blood_sugar/](https://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/treating_low_blood_sugar/)