

HYPOGLYCAEMIA AT THE WHEEL

Low blood sugar or hypoglycaemia can put vehicle drivers with diabetes and other road users at risk of an accident on the road. This happens when blood glucose levels fall below normal levels. It can happen to anyone with diabetes, but is more common with those taking insulin and certain types of oral glucose-lowering medication such as sulphonylureas.

The problem is compounded if they have been physically active, such as shopping or exercising; have missed a meal or eaten a smaller than usual meal; have other medical problems such as renal impairment, which can increase the risk of hypoglycaemia from medication; and have been on medication that can cause drowsiness.

On the road, these would reduce your alertness and the ability to notice signs and symptoms of low blood glucose, which could, in turn, lead to potentially tragic outcomes.

“Drivers with diabetes should always have glucose tablets handy. And until all symptoms of hypoglycaemia—including trembling, excessive sweating and nausea—are gone, the driver should not resume driving.”

WHEN GLUCOSE LEVELS DROP

A blood glucose level of less than 4.0 mmol/L is considered hypoglycaemia, and could make the person dizzy or agitated, impairing concentration and reaction times. Other symptoms include trembling, excessive sweating, accelerated heartbeat, headaches, a tingling sensation in the fingers, lips or tongue, and feeling hungry or nauseous.

If left untreated, hypoglycaemia could become more severe, leading to weakness and difficulty walking, blurred vision, confusion and abnormal behaviour, unclear speech, seizures, and even loss of consciousness.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms you should call for an ambulance or find someone nearby to do so immediately.

If you are on the road, find a safe place to stop and park the car. Turn off the engine and shift to the passenger seat. Drink 15g of fast-acting carbohydrates such as fruit juices or glucose tablets, which should be kept handy.

Wait 15 minutes before testing the blood glucose level. If it has reached above 4.0 mmol/L (but is less than 5.0 mmol/L), take another 15g of carbohydrates.

The driver should not resume driving until all the symptoms are gone and he is able to perform tasks such as mental arithmetic. This could take as long as 30 to 45 minutes.

STAYING SAFE

Most people with diabetes are able to maintain stable blood glucose levels, and can drive without incident. However, because of the dangers posed by hypoglycaemia, it is important to monitor blood glucose levels before and along the journey. This is especially so on long or extended journeys. Ensure that your blood glucose level is above 5.0mmol/L before driving.

Here are some helpful tips to stay safe while driving, from the SingHealth Duke-NUS Diabetes Centre:

DO

- Bring a glucometer to monitor blood glucose readings.
- Protect your glucometer from extreme temperatures by not leaving it in the car on a hot day, or under direct sunlight, to ensure it gives accurate readings at all times.
- Carry quick and long-acting carbohydrates to treat hypoglycaemia.
- Always test blood glucose levels before driving, and every two hours into driving. If the blood glucose reading is below 5.0 mmol/L, take 15g of carbohydrates (such as three biscuits or one slice of bread) before starting to drive.
- Carry a Medik Awas card to identify yourself as a person with diabetes in case of an emergency. If you have a hypoglycaemia episode, treat the hypoglycaemia and do not drive until you have recovered fully.

DON'T

- Drive with blood glucose levels below 5.0 mmol/L.
- Drive when tired or are on medication that may cause drowsiness.
- Drink and drive.

APPLY FOR THE MEDIK AWAS CARD

Apply for and carry a Medik Awas card at all times. The card, issued by the Singapore Medical Association, will have your personal details, medical conditions, drugs, allergies, medication, as well as your doctor's name and contact number. The card will be very helpful if you are unable to communicate vital information to people around you, or to medical or dental personnel during a medical emergency. To find out how to apply for a Medik Awas card, visit www.sma.org.sg/medikawas.