What Is a Diabetic Shock and How Can It Be Prevented?

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Know the Signs of Diabetic Shock to Prevent Diabetic Coma

Hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia can be a frightening event, but often a quick boost of sugar or injection of insulin is all you need to restore balance. On the other hand, high or low blood sugar that's left untreated can escalate quickly, and life-threatening symptoms can develop as the body tries to deal with the imbalance of glucose and insulin in the body.

Diabetic shock is more common than you might imagine. Since many medications can leave you prone to hypoglycemia, and people with long-standing diabetes could begin to ignore symptoms, you may be at risk for diabetic shock without realizing it.

Learn the common warning signs, when to act, and how to protect yourself or someone else from the dangerous consequences.

Early Warning Signs of Diabetic Shock

There are different levels of hypoglycemic and hyperglycemic shock, and while the symptoms may be mild at the outset, they will get progressively worse. Fatigue, nausea, and anxiety are classic signs of trouble, but severe low blood sugar and severe high blood sugar each bring some distinct symptoms.

Hypoglycemic Shock

When there's not enough glucose in your blood, symptoms can fluctuate wildly — they may mimic a panic attack, or might leave you feeling very weak. Here are some of the most common changes to watch for, listed from mild to more severe:

- Shakiness
- Anxiety
- Sweating
- Hunger
- Light-headedness
- Weakness
- Confusion
- Difficulty speaking
- Extreme irritability
- Blurred vision

In general, severe cognitive symptoms (confusion, difficulty speaking, or loss of coordination) indicate that your hypoglycemia has advanced to a more severe stage. In these cases, it can be difficult for a diabetic to follow directions, and they might resist treatment.

If you suspect you could lose consciousness, reach out for help right away.

Hyperglycemic Shock

When there's too much glucose in your blood you're more likely to notice extreme thirst instead of hunger (diabetes and dehydration go hand-in-hand), and a rapid heartbeat along with your nausea. Other common symptoms of hyperglycemic shock include:

Frequent urination
Very dry mouth
Vomiting

Stomach A fruity

- A fruity odor to the breath
- Shortness of breath

In many cases when the hyperglycemic symptoms are fairly mild, exercise can help to bring your blood sugar back down to a reasonable level. However, when your body is severely starved of insulin, exercise isn't the answer. Extreme hyperglycemia can lead to ketoacidosis, a life-threatening emergency.

When the body doesn't have the insulin needed to use carbohydrates for energy, it will begin to draw on stored fat, producing waste products known as ketones. If these ketones are present in your urine, exercise can send your blood sugar even higher and put you at high risk for diabetic coma.

Shortness of breath, fruity smelling breath, and vomiting signal a medical emergency — call 911 instead of trying to treat the problem at home.

Diabetic Coma

Diabetic shock can lead to a diabetic coma when you don't intervene fast enough. Typically, symptoms progress from dizziness and fatigue to confusion and weakness, then poor coordination, muscle tremors, and seizures when your blood sugar drops into the 30 mg/dl range.

When blood sugar spikes into the 600 mg/dl range, fatigue and weakness can give way to high fever, headaches, hallucinations, and paralysis before a diabetic loses consciousness. Each extreme can lead to a type of diabetic coma.

Naturally, you shouldn't give food, drink, or oral supplements to someone who is losing consciousness, since they could choke. At this point, the body is in a severe state that requires prompt medical intervention.

How to Handle a Diabetic Shock Emergency

When symptoms progress or are difficult to control, you need to take quick action. In order to proceed safely, keep these important steps in mind if you ever find yourself in a diabetic shock emergency.

Stop What You're Doing

Driving a car, riding a bike, or performing any activity requiring attention and coordination can put you at danger if your symptoms are spiraling out of control.

The first step is to stop what you're doing and bring your blood glucose back to safe levels before continuing. This small step could save you and the people around you from injury.

Next page: preventing blood sugar crises.

How to Handle a Diabetic Shock Emergency

Test Blood Sugar

It's nearly impossible to guess just where your blood sugar stands during a hypoglycemic episode, so check your levels right away. If your vision is beginning to suffer, or you're too lightheaded to manage the task on your own, have someone help you check your blood sugar.

If there's no one there to help, it's a good idea to start treating your symptoms anyway with a small sugary snack, and then checking your blood sugar once you've regained some control.

Turn to Your Action Plan

Prepare for the worst by drawing up a diabetic shock action plan with the help of your doctor and nutritionist. Include clear steps to take, which foods to eat (and how much of each), and when and who to call for help.

Keep a glucagon rescue kit at home, and familiarize yourself with how to prepare and inject the solution. Having a set of medically sound steps to follow can help to keep you calm while you work to correct the problem, or wait for emergency personnel.

Ask for Help

There is no reason to deal with diabetic shock on your own. Put aside any worry or embarrassment, and ask for help.

It's best to inform family and friends now of the signs of diabetic shock and how to help you treat it, so no time is wasted when a crisis hits. Remember the longer you wait, the more likely your symptoms will escalate, and an extra pair of helping hands can make a huge difference.

Preventing Blood Sugar Crises

There are several ways to wind up with too much insulin in your bloodstream, leading to hypoglycemic shock. In order to avoid the possibility of slipping into a diabetic coma, suffering brain damage, and even dying from the event, it's vital you take action before the problem has a chance to gain ground.

Carefully Monitor Your Insulin

Taking in too much insulin can leave you with far too little glucose in your blood, which will deny your cells the fuel they need, and your body begins to shut down. Injecting too much insulin is an easy way to throw off the balance, so time your injections well and stick closely to your medication guidelines.

Eat Wisely

Insulin works hand-in-hand with food to keep your blood balanced and your body energized. If you don't eat an appropriate meal after you take your insulin, you set the stage for hypoglycemia. Missing a meal is a serious mistake, but even waiting too long or not eating quite enough can cause a problem.

If you do develop symptoms of hypoglycemia, don't try to make up for it by over-indulging; a small amount of the right types of sugary food is a much safer bet.

A small serving of juice, honey, dried fruit, or three to five glucose tablets will work more efficiently than a delayed meal. Keep some with you at all times.

Be Sensitive to Symptoms

You aren't doing your body any favors when you ignore mild hypoglycemia symptoms, but some diabetics won't catch the early warning signs before they build into something serious. This condition, known as hypoglycemia unawareness, usually affects long-time diabetics who have grown used to their disease.

It will do you well to pay very close attention to physiological changes, so you can swiftly test your blood glucose to identify and correct the problem.

Wear Your Medical ID

Diabetic shock can turn into a diabetic coma in a surprisingly short amount of time. If you lose consciousness during a hypoglycemic episode, you'll need to count on the people around you to give you the care and attention your body needs.

Wearing a medical ID bracelet or necklace will provide critical info to friends, bystanders, emergency personnel, and doctors in case you can't speak for yourself. There are even IDs that hold USB drives with your full medical record to aid in an emergency.

Taking Control Every Day

Since so many factors can play a role in your risk of diabetic shock, the more you know about your disease, the better you'll be able to tailor your lifestyle accordingly.

For instance, exercise is an important part of diabetes management, but it can alter you blood sugar levels quite drastically — be sure you know how your body responds before making any drastic changes to your workout schedule.

It can be tricky to balance diet, medication, exercise, and other medical considerations to keep your diabetes in check, but a commitment to your health will make a significant difference now, and in the years to come. Make a pledge to put your health first, and keep learning about your condition to stay on top of your game and out of the diabetic danger zone.