

Fear of hypoglycaemia

Hypoglycaemia or 'hypo' (low blood glucose) is a common challenge for people managing their diabetes with insulin or other glucose lowering medications. People with diabetes often worry or become fearful about hypos. If you feel this way, you are not alone. There are many things you can do to prevent hypos and ease your fears.



“There’s nothing worse than having that fear at the back of your head that you’re going to be in a meeting or something and pass out from not treating a hypo quick enough – it’s never happened, touch wood.”

Melissa, 31, person with diabetes

What is fear of hypoglycaemia?

Fear of hypos is a specific and intense feeling brought on by the risk and/or experiences of having low blood glucose.

It is common to worry about:

- » losing consciousness in public
- » having an accident or injury
- » having a hypo while asleep
- » being embarrassed or attracting unwanted attention
- » needing/relying on others for help
- » losing independence or the ability to drive
- » being judged in a negative way by others.

It is natural to have concerns about hypos. This keeps you alert to the symptoms of low blood glucose, which enables you to treat a hypo promptly when it happens. However, fear of hypos becomes a serious problem when these worries start to impact on daily life or diabetes management, for example:

- » reducing insulin or over-eating to avoid having a hypo
- » checking blood glucose levels excessively
- » avoiding social activities for fear of embarrassment
- » avoiding being alone due to worries about safety.

Helpline 1300 136 588

ndss.com.au

If you think you are experiencing fear of hypos, talk with your health professional. They will assess the problem and help you work out strategies for preventing hypos and reducing your fears.

What you can do

Whether or not you fear hypos, it's important to look after your emotional well-being.

Some of the following strategies may work for you – others may not, and that's okay. They may give you ideas about other things you could try.

Be informed

Hypos can be prevented. The first step is to be informed about your actual risk and how to prevent, recognise, and treat hypos. If you get the right information and support, you will find that you feel more confident to manage your risk of hypos, treat them before they become severe, and reduce your fears.

A good place to start is by contacting the diabetes organisation in your state/territory. If you are unsure about who to contact, call the Diabetes Australia Helpline on 1300 136 588 and they can direct you.

Take care when searching the internet for medical advice – make sure you consult reliable sources (eg professional organisations).

Have a hypo plan

Having a plan for how to manage a hypo can help reduce any anxiety or fears you may have about the experience. Keep your 'hypo kit' with you at all times so you can treat a hypo promptly (see box).

Make sure your family, friends, and other people that you spend a lot of time with know what to do when you can't treat a hypo yourself. If you live alone, consider asking someone (eg a friend or neighbour) to check on you on a regular basis.



Managing a hypo

If you have hypo symptoms (eg shaking, sweating, light headedness) or a blood glucose level of **less than 4mmol/l** (even if you have no symptoms), follow these steps:

1. Have 15 grams of glucose (equivalent to 150ml fruit juice **OR** 4 large jelly beans **OR** 7 small jelly beans).
2. Wait 15 minutes and then re-check your blood glucose level.
3. If your blood glucose level is still **less than 4mmol/l**, have another 15 grams of glucose.
4. Consider the need for a longer-acting carbohydrate if your next meal is more than 20 minutes away.

Note: This is the current recommendation of the National Diabetes Services Scheme. For individualised advice, please talk with your diabetes health professional.

Ask questions

It's okay if you don't have all the answers about hypos or managing your fear of hypos. Sometimes, people find that writing a list of questions and concerns is a useful way of processing some of their feelings.

- » Bring this list along to your next diabetes appointment, so you don't forget the questions or concerns you want to talk over with your health professional.
- » Remember, there are no silly questions or concerns – they are all valid. Your health professional will appreciate anything you mention, as it will help them to offer you the best support.

Be aware of your symptoms

People who are less aware of their hypo symptoms often fear hypos the most. This is because they don't know when their hypos are coming on. This leaves them feeling out of control.

- » Keep a record of your symptoms throughout the day (eg how you were feeling physically and emotionally, how you reacted).
- » After a hypo, ask yourself, 'What do I think caused this hypo?' (eg what were you doing at the time, when did you last eat or inject insulin). No-one knows your body better than you – trust your own judgement.
- » Notice patterns in the days and times you have hypos and think about how you can avoid similar hypos in the future.
- » Ask yourself, 'What concerns me the most about having a hypo?'. You may not be fully aware of what you are fearing. Thinking it through and writing it down can provide you with a lot of insight.

Getting to know your hypo symptoms better can prepare you to take action to prevent low blood glucose. This can make you feel more in control and less fearful of the unknown. Your health professional can also help you develop a plan to reduce your hypos and fears.

If you don't have symptoms (or don't recognise them quickly enough to avoid a hypo), speak with your health professional. You may have 'impaired awareness of hypoglycaemia', which they can help with.

"I understand so much more about it now and I know how to get myself out of a hypo and I know how to adjust if I'm too high with my sugars, mainly because I've done the DAFNE program, I think."*

Dave, 62, person with type 1 diabetes

* DAFNE is a structured type 1 diabetes training program (see following page).

Get connected

Talking things through with others can be a big help. You might like to talk with your family or friends about how you feel, and how they can support you.

It may also help to talk with others who understand what it is like to live with diabetes. It can be reassuring to know that other people face similar challenges and to share ideas about how to cope with them. Join a support group or an online community – read on to find out where you can access 'peer support'.

Talk with a professional

The strategies above may give you some ideas about how to prevent hypos and reduce your fears. However, they can't replace professional help. It's always a good idea to talk about your concerns with your health professional(s).

Who can help?

Your diabetes health professionals

Your diabetes health professionals are there to help you with all aspects of your diabetes, including how you feel about hypos. If you feel comfortable, share your feelings with them – they will give you non-judgemental support and advice. You may want to talk with your:

- » general practitioner (GP)
- » endocrinologist
- » diabetes educator
- » nurse practitioner
- » dietitian.

Bring this leaflet along to your consultation to help get the conversation started. You will probably feel relieved after sharing your feelings, and it will help your health professional to understand how you are feeling.

Together, you can make plans to reduce your fears. For example, your health professional can help you to safely make some small changes to your diabetes management so that it feels less scary.

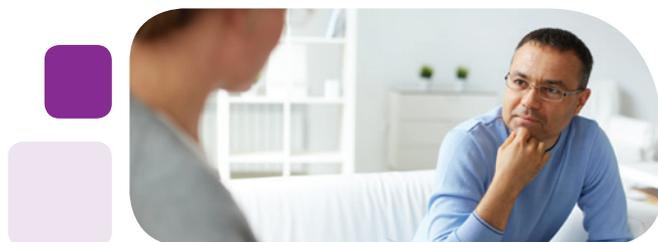
- » You might like to attend a structured diabetes education session. Learning more about hypos and how to best manage your diabetes could make it easier to prevent and treat hypos. It will strengthen your confidence in your skills and reduce your concerns.
- » There may be group education sessions in your area.
- » Ask your health professional or contact the diabetes organisation in your state/territory for more information.

A psychologist

You might also like to talk with a psychologist. They will help you find ways to cope with your fear of hypos.

Ask your diabetes health professional if they know a psychologist in your area who is familiar with diabetes. You can also find a psychologist near you by going to the Australian Psychological Society website at www.psychology.org.au/FaP

Your GP can tell you if you are eligible for a Mental Health Treatment Plan to reduce the costs involved in seeing a psychologist.



More information and support

Dose Adjustment For Normal Eating (DAFNE)
www.dafne.org.au

DAFNE is a five-day structured type 1 diabetes training program. People attend in small groups, with others who have type 1 diabetes, to learn more about self-managing the condition. Studies have proven that DAFNE can help people with problematic hypos. On average, rates of severe hypo are halved following DAFNE training. Courses are available in approximately 20 centres in most states/territories across Australia.

Australian Diabetes Online Community (OzDOC): weekly TweetChat
www.twitter.com/ozdiabetesoc

To connect with other people with diabetes for online peer support. The community chats online, once a week, using Twitter. Search for @OzDiabetesOC and #OzDOC.

Peer support
www.ndss.com.au
(search for 'Publications & Resources')

To find out about what peer support is and how you can access it in your area, refer to the National Diabetes Services Scheme (NDSS) leaflet, *Peer support for diabetes*.

Diabetes Australia & NDSS
www.diabetesaustralia.com.au
www.ndss.com.au
Helpline 1300 136 588

Diabetes Australia offers a free national NDSS Helpline, through which people with diabetes and their carers can access diabetes information, education programs, peer support groups, and other events.

The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Helpline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

Developed in collaboration with The Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes, a partnership for better health between Diabetes Victoria and Deakin University.