Sweaty and Irritable? You Could be Hypoglycemic

by AFRA WILLMORE

The Risks of Hypoglycemia With Diabetes

One of the things newly diagnosed diabetics often worry about is hypoglycemia — their blood sugar dropping dangerously low suddenly and unexpectedly without them noticing, putting them at risk of coma, brain damage, and death.

This was one of my concerns anyway, especially after my doctor told me it is not common practice at my medical office to issue blood sugar monitors to patients with type 2 diabetes, which is what I was diagnosed with in my 30s.

How would I know whether my sugars were high or low if I could not do regular finger-prick tests? I didnot want to overeat in case I sent my blood sugars the other way and suffered hyperglycemia – high blood sugar levels, which can also be dangerous.

Symptoms of Hypoglycemia: Signs to Watch for

Luckily in my eagerness to keep my sugars low in the early days, I had a couple of episodes where my blood sugars dipped. Not dangerously low, but low enough to show me the symptoms my own body helpfully produced to warn me.

I felt a bit dizzy, quite tired but the most obvious sign of my falling sugars was my body starting to shake.

It started with tremors in my hands — not noticeable to see at first but as my body sent out all the warning signs it could, the shaking got more pronounced and spread to my whole body.

Luckily I was still able to speak and alerted my friend (who I had trained in what to do if I suffered a hypo or hyper episode) who found the glucose tablets I keep in my bag and helped me dissolve it in my mouth.

Preparing for an Emergency With Hypoglycemia

Here are a few useful tips to help in an emergency. Tell all the people you regularly spend time with what to do if you become ill, ranging from getting you a sweet drink, or a biscuit (depending on the severity of your symptoms), to calling an ambulance.

Keep a list of "what to do" in your purse or wallet along with the list of medications and doses you are on. Think about wearing a medical alert bracelet if you regularly suffer from low or high blood sugar episodes.

I was very proud of my children once when they administered swift treatment after I told them I could feel my sugars were too low. As I laid on the sofa sipping cola feeling full of love and gratitude watching their concerned faces as they all watched over me.

I assured them I was a little better and the eldest answered, "Great – can we go and watch TV again now?" Turns out they were more worried about missing their cartoon than their poor mother!

So shaking or tremors are really important for knowing that you could be heading towards hypoglycemia. But what causes this? You might be bewildered especially if you think you have eaten normally that day.

What Causes Hypoglycemia?

Well for type 1 diabetics or those with type 2 using insulin, it might be that you have taken too much insulin.

Not on insulin? Maybe you skipped a meal or drank alcohol on an empty stomach. Or maybe there was not enough carbohydrate content in your last meal.

Maybe you did more exercise than normal, and this does not just mean Step Aerobics or Zumba. Vigorous housework or a long spell doing heavier gardening jobs can cause a hypoglycemia hours after the actual chores are finished.

Direct heat can also have an effect on your sugars, along with illness and stress. Be aware of this if you are fan of sunbathing or saunas.

Along with the shakes, you might feel sweaty, your lips might feel tingly and you might feel confused, tired, nauseous, or all three. You might feel hungry, and if you do not eat or drink something sugary, like orange juice, a soda, or a glucose tablet, you may soon become more confused, your speech could slur, and if left untreated, you could become unconscious.

Recovering from a Hypoglycemic Episode

As you start to recover, eat something like a small sandwich or a piece of fruit to bring your sugars up slowly. Don't forget to test your sugars about an hour after any hypoglycemia episode if possible and eat carbs that are absorbed more slowly like bread or pasta if your numbers are still low.

I always carry emergency snacks in my handbag – a couple of wrapped breakfast biscuits or a cereal bar along with my glucose tablets. Luckily I keep my diabetes quite well controlled, so on the odd occasion when I realize I am late for a meal or feeling a bit dizzy or hungry, I generally find I have a packet of biscuit crumbs to enjoy! Still licking crumbs from a crinkled dusty wrapper is better than risking a hypoglycemia.

If you do test your blood sugars regularly, you might notice that the point you feel shaky is not necessarily as low as your doctor warned might cause a hypoglycemic episode. Or you might feel fine right below that danger zone.

This is because everyone reacts differently to the level of sugars in the blood. You know your body better than anyone. The book may say you do not have hypoglycemia until your sugars drop below 40mg/dl but if your glucose meter says 45 and you are experiencing the warning signs it is better to take preventative action sooner rather than when it is too late!