

Diabetes and taking medications for other conditions



Apart from the medications you take to control your diabetes — insulin and/or oral hypoglycaemic tablets — you may at times be prescribed medicines to treat other conditions. Some of these medicines can affect your blood sugar levels and alter your usual diabetic control.

Keeping your doctor informed

It is important to always tell any doctor who is treating you that you have diabetes. Also tell them the names and doses of all the medications you are currently taking, including your diabetes medications, other prescription medicines including ointments, eye drops and medicines you take only when needed, over-the-counter preparations from your pharmacist or supermarket, and herbs, supplements and complementary medicines. Your doctor will then be able to prescribe medicines for you with your diabetes control in mind.

How other medicines can affect your diabetes

Some medicines may *increase* your blood glucose levels. For example, steroids (specifically corticosteroids) — which are prescribed to treat inflammation in the body as may occur in arthritis, asthma or other lung problems — can cause high blood glucose levels. Other examples include oral contraceptives that contain a high amount of oestrogen, and some diuretics ('fluid' tablets).

Some medicines may *decrease* your blood glucose levels. For example, some of the medicines used to treat high blood pressure can decrease your blood glucose level via increasing your sensitivity to insulin. Other medicines may cause low blood glucose by enhancing the glucose-lowering effect of sulphonylurea tablets prescribed to treat diabetes. Another prominent example is alcohol, which is discussed below.

Some medicines may worsen the complications of diabetes, such as kidney disease.

Non-prescription medicines

Be aware that some over-the-counter medicines can also affect your blood glucose control. For example, many syrups contain a high level of sugar. If you are purchasing a medicine that is in syrup form, ask the pharmacist if a 'sugar free' option is available.

Decongestants, which are often used to treat sinus conditions and head colds, can increase your blood glucose level, yet can also cause side-effects that mimic the symptoms of low blood glucose, leading to confusion when you are trying to assess your blood sugar level.

It is a good idea to check with your pharmacist about how an over-the-counter medicine that you intend to purchase might affect your diabetes.

Herbs, supplements and complementary medicines

Some complementary medicines can affect blood sugar levels. For example, fenugreek may lower blood sugar levels, potentially affecting the doses of diabetes medications you need. Make sure you let your doctor know what complementary therapies you are considering using and feel free to ask questions about these or any complementary therapies you are taking. Make sure your complementary healthcare practitioner knows that you have diabetes, whether your diabetes has affected any vital organs such as your kidneys, and what diabetes medications you are taking.

Alcohol

Alcohol can lower your blood glucose level, as well as alter your ability to recognise the symptoms of a 'hypo' (very low blood sugar) and can reduce the ability of your liver to release more glucose into the bloodstream, which normally helps counteract very low blood sugar levels. These effects are particularly important for people on insulin injections or sulphonylurea tablets for diabetes, as the result can be a serious hypoglycaemic episode.

It is recommended that if you have diabetes you should drink only moderate amounts of alcohol, and if you are on insulin injections or sulphonylurea tablets for diabetes, always consume some carbohydrate food when you drink alcohol.

Recreational drugs

Recreational drugs such as marijuana and ecstasy can indirectly affect your blood glucose levels by markedly changing your eating and activity levels, as well as your ability to accurately recognise dangerously low blood sugar levels.

Tips to help keep your diabetes well-controlled

- ▶ Before you take a new medication, including a complementary therapy, ask your doctor or pharmacist what effect it might have on your diabetes.
- ▶ When starting a new medication that might affect control of your diabetes, check your blood glucose levels more often.
- ▶ If you notice that a new medicine is causing an unexpected change in your blood glucose levels, or a change in your blood glucose levels that is not responding to adjusting your diabetes medication, talk to your doctor.
- ▶ If you have any complications of diabetes, such as kidney problems or blood supply problems in the legs, talk to your doctor about how your new medicine might affect these conditions.
- ▶ For medicines that have the unwanted side-effect of affecting blood glucose levels, there may be another similar medicine that will still treat you effectively, but will not affect your diabetic control — always check with your doctor or pharmacist.
- ▶ Knowing how a new medicine might affect your blood glucose control allows you to prepare yourself for a possible change in your usual blood glucose levels and for a possible need to adjust your insulin dose or other diabetes medication.

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