

Safe driving for people with diabetes

Driving requires peak focus and attention, as well as quick responses. Many things can impair one's driving ability and can create a situation where mistakes may cost a life. Alcohol, drugs, drowsiness, physical exhaustion, and adverse effects of drugs are just a few of the things that can affect a person's ability to drive well. Studies have also shown that **low blood glucose** (low blood sugar) levels can negatively affect the ability of a person with

diabetes to drive well.

In an article in the August 25, 1999, issue of *JAMA*, researchers found that some persons with **type 1 diabetes** (insulin-dependent diabetes) may not correctly judge at what levels their blood sugar is so low that it may no longer be safe to drive. Nearly 45% of the time participants in the study said they would drive even though their blood sugar levels were in a range that is associated with declining driver performance.

HOW DOES LOW BLOOD SUGAR AFFECT DRIVING?

Controlling blood **glucose** (a simple sugar that is the body's main source of energy) levels can be extremely difficult for persons with diabetes. Because their bodies either do not produce any **insulin** (the hormone that regulates blood glucose levels) or do not produce enough insulin, people with diabetes often have too much glucose in their blood.

Some persons with diabetes need to take insulin or glucose-lowering drugs that can sometimes cause their blood glucose levels to drop too low. This can lead to complications that can affect one's ability to drive, such as dizziness, trembling, headaches, confusion, disorientation, and double vision.

WHAT IS HYPOGLYCEMIA?

Hypoglycemia occurs when the blood sugar levels are abnormally low. In some cases, hypoglycemia can cause a person to become aggressive or seem uncooperative, which can easily be mistaken for drunkenness by people who do not know about the effects of hypoglycemia. In

WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD SOMEONE WITH DIABETES TAKE?

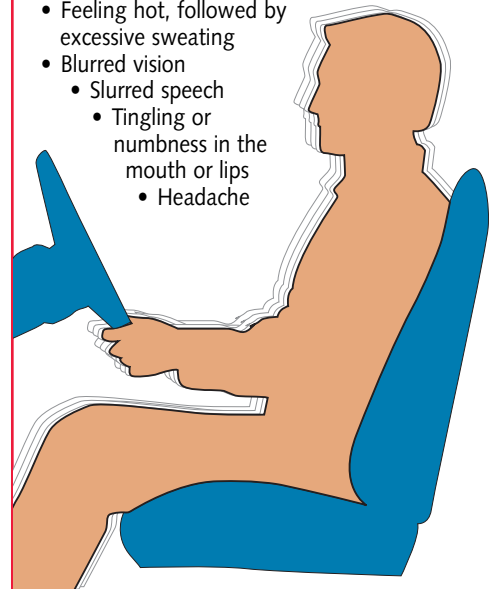
There is no reason why people with diabetes should not drive if they have their blood sugar levels under control. However, if you have diabetes or are adversely affected by low blood sugar, you should be cautious when making the decision to drive.

- Be aware of your blood sugar levels by regularly monitoring them. Do not drive when they are lower than 65 mg/dL
- Carry some food that will help raise your blood sugar level when needed
- Plan your trips to make sure you will not be late for a meal or miss a meal
- Carry identification that lets others know that you have diabetes. In case there is a medical emergency, the identification will alert others that you need treatment immediately.

extreme cases, hypoglycemia can cause a person to become unconscious. If this happens to someone you are with, seek medical assistance immediately and inform those providing treatment that the person has diabetes.

EARLY SYMPTOMS OF HYPOGLYCEMIA:

- Feeling shaky or irritable
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Feeling hot, followed by excessive sweating
- Blurred vision
 - Slurred speech
 - Tingling or numbness in the mouth or lips
 - Headache



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Diabetes Association
800/232-3472 or
www.diabetes.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A previous *JAMA* Patient Page on diabetes was published on July 8, 1998.

Additional Sources: American Diabetes Association, AMA's Family Medical Guide, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

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