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HYPOGLYCEMIA & CAFFEINE

Mar 14, 2011 | By [Suzanne Robin](#)

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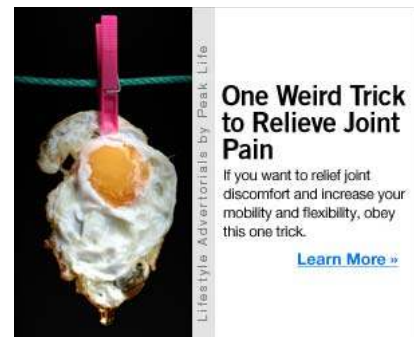
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Diabetics, especially those who take insulin, are most likely to develop hypoglycemia, the medical term for [blood glucose levels](#) below 70 mg/dL, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disorders. Non-diabetics can also have a type of hypoglycemia called reactive hypoglycemia. Caffeine in large doses causes similar side effects to hypoglycemia and may worsen symptoms. In some cases, however, caffeine may benefit diabetics with hypoglycemia unawareness, a drop in blood sugar not accompanied by symptoms.



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SYMPTOM SIMILARITIES

Abnormally low [blood sugar](#) levels, medically termed hypoglycemia, can make you feel weak, lightheaded, dizzy, shaky, sweaty, hungry and confused. The symptoms of hypoglycemia are caused by a release of epinephrine meant to increase your falling blood glucose levels. Caffeine, which is a central nervous system stimulant, also causes some of the same symptoms in doses greater than 200 mg, or about two cups of coffee. Central nervous system stimulants also increase epinephrine release, which is why caffeine and hypoglycemia can cause many of the same symptoms.

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RESULTS

Because caffeine in large amounts stimulates epinephrine release the same way hypoglycemia does, ingesting caffeine when you're hypoglycemic can potentiate the symptoms by increasing the amount of epinephrine released. More epinephrine means more intense symptoms.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

Some diabetics develop insensitivity to hypoglycemia and no longer experience the same hormonal responses and side effects when blood sugar drops. Because there are few recognizable warning signs, glucose is not likely to be taken in time to prevent a more severe reaction. Hypoglycemia unawareness can lead to dangerous blood sugar drops with an increased possibility of loss of consciousness and coma. A study conducted by researchers from the Royal Bournemouth Hospital in the U.K. found that modest doses of caffeine, which increases the typical symptoms of hypoglycemia, may help a diabetic with hypoglycemia unawareness recognize and treat his symptoms before they progress. Since caffeine does increase the risk of heart disease and hypertension, which can also affect people with [diabetes](#) more often than the general population, only modest doses of caffeine should be taken. The study was published in the summer 1999 issue of "Diabetes Technology and Therapeutics."

CONSIDERATIONS

Caffeine may have some benefits in hypoglycemia recognition in one group of people, but caffeine can also worsen hypoglycemia symptoms in others. Do not use caffeine as a way to treat hypoglycemia without your doctor's approval. For non-diabetics with hypoglycemia, who don't ever develop hypoglycemia unawareness, caffeine ingestion will worsen hypoglycemia symptoms.

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REFERENCES

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- National Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disorders; Hypoglycemia; October 2008
- "Diabetes Technology and Therapeutics" ; The Best Defense Against Hypoglycemia is to Recognize it: Is Caffeine Useful?; J. Watson, et al.; Summer 1999

Article reviewed by Libby Swope Wiersema Last updated on: Mar 14, 2011

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