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Hypoglycemia: Information for Parents

# Definition

Glucose is a form of sugar in the blood and is a main source of fuel for all organs in the body, especially the brain. An important part of your baby’s successful transition after birth is to be able to maintain a normal glucose level (aka “sugar” level) so his or her body safely adapts. Hypoglycemia occurs when there is not enough sugar in the blood. Hypoglycemia is difficult to define by an absolute number; many resources better define hypoglycemia by the presence of particular signs or symptoms.

# Causes

Normally, your baby’s body will naturally try to control the level of glucose in the blood. When there is not enough glucose (hypoglycemia), his or her body will release stored sugar. When there is too much sugar, the body will release insulin to help lower the glucose level. It is common for newborns to experience low blood sugar levels soon after birth. This is usually a temporary situation as a newborn’s body tries to adjust the blood sugar level.

Factors that can increase your baby’s risk of hypoglycemia due to low glucose stores include

* premature birth
* low birth weight
* situations that use high amounts of glucose, such as stress during delivery, temperature of the environment making your baby’s temperature drop, infection, fever, respiratory distress, and seizures
* birth defects
* certain conditions in which the infant has been exposed to high insulin levels, such as the mother having diabetes, the infant being large for gestational age, and certain syndromes.

# Symptoms

Symptoms of hypoglycemia your baby might have include

* irritability (i.e., not being consoled easily)
* trembling or jitteriness
* abnormal cry (high pitched or weak)
* seizures
* bluish skin
* refusal to feed
* breathing problems
* abnormal vital signs, such as low temperature.

# Diagnosis

Your baby will receive a full exam and a medical history will be obtained in order to make the diagnosis. Your baby’s blood will be tested to determine a glucose value. Your care provider will want to determine the cause of your baby’s low blood sugar. Based on the cause(s), your baby will receive tests and therapies that will best treat the low blood sugar.

# Treatment

Talk with your baby’s care provider about the best treatment plan for your baby. Treatment will focus on increasing the glucose in your baby’s blood. Underlying issues also may need to be treated. Options may include

* medications—Certain medications may be needed if your baby continues to have low blood sugars despite frequent feedings or IV treatment. Your care provider will discuss these medications with you to provide specific information on the medications your baby needs.
* frequent feedings and therapies—Frequent feedings may help raise blood glucose levels in your baby. Your baby may also be given glucose in to their blood system through an intravenous (IV) catheter. This may be done until your baby’s blood glucose level is stable.

Ongoing monitoring of your baby’s blood sugar should continue until the blood sugar is stable and your baby has stable blood sugar values with only feedings of breast milk or formula.

# Prevention

* Feed your baby early and often.
* Watch your infant for any of the above signs and symptoms and report them immediately to your care team.
* Keep your baby warm and follow your nurses’ instructions for skin-to-skin with your baby.