HEALTH CONDITION · SUMMARY

Reactive Hypoglycaemia

A drop in blood sugar a few hours after eating, usually after a meal high in sugar or refined carbohydrate. It normally settles once you change what and how you eat.

What it is

Reactive hypoglycaemia is a fall in blood sugar within a few hours of eating, usually 2 to 4 hours after a meal. It is the cause of what many people call a mid-morning or mid-afternoon crash: sudden tiredness, hunger and shakiness that lifts as soon as you eat. The problem is one of timing. A meal that raises blood sugar quickly triggers a large release of insulin, which then pulls blood sugar down too far an hour or two later.

Symptoms to look out for

- Shakiness, trembling or weakness
- Sweating, and a fast or pounding heartbeat
- Sudden, strong hunger
- Irritability, anxiety or low mood
- Poor concentration, light-headedness or a foggy head

Symptoms come on a couple of hours after eating and ease when you eat again. They are caused by the low blood sugar itself, and by the adrenaline your body releases in response.

What causes it

The usual trigger is a meal or drink high in sugar or quickly digested carbohydrate, with little protein, fat or fibre to slow it down. People with early insulin resistance are more prone to it, because their insulin response is already less precise. Less often it follows stomach surgery, where food leaves the stomach very quickly. Rarely it points to another condition, so persistent or severe cases need checking.

An early sign of insulin resistance

This can seem the wrong way round, because insulin resistance is usually linked to blood sugar running high rather than low. When cells start to resist insulin, the pancreas makes more of it to keep up. Early on, that extra insulin can overshoot after a meal and pull blood sugar below normal.

What you can do

- **Food.** Diet is the main treatment. Reduce sugary food and drink, and refined carbohydrate such as white bread, rice and pasta. Build meals with plenty of protein and non-starchy vegetables, with starchy carbohydrate reduced or personalised. This slows the release of glucose and reduces the insulin spike that causes the later crash.
- **How much carbohydrate.** Many people find symptoms settle when they eat less carbohydrate overall. Try this as a starting point and adjust based on how you feel.
- **Meal pattern.** Avoid large, high-carbohydrate meals on an empty stomach.
- **Movement.** A walk after meals helps your muscles take up glucose and steadies the response.

Medicines and supplements

Medication is rarely needed, and no supplement is established as a treatment. Cutting down on alcohol, which can both cause lows and mask them, and on caffeine, which can make the shaky symptoms worse, helps some people.

When to get help

- See a doctor if episodes are frequent, severe, or happen when you have not eaten for a while. Low blood sugar when fasting needs to be investigated.
- Get help promptly for any episode causing confusion, fainting or loss of consciousness.
- Tell your doctor if you take diabetes medication, because those can also cause low blood sugar and need a different approach.

This is general information, not medical advice. Always speak to a qualified healthcare professional about your own symptoms and treatment, including before changing any medication.

Summarised from the in-depth article by Dr Campbell Murdoch, GP, UK · healthshelf.org · Reviewed August 2026