Treating Hypoglycemia in Diabetics

Problem

Diabetes is becoming more common as our populations age. With greater numbers of people living with diabetes, it is important that nurses in all inpatient settings are competent in the care of the diabetic patient. It is especially critical that nurses be able to recognize and respond quickly to patient experiencing low blood glucose levels or hypoglycemia.

Consequence

Failure to recognize the symptoms of hypoglycemia and respond quickly may result in serious harm or even death in a diabetic patient.

Solution

Here are some suggested steps to take to address this problem.

- Hypoglycemia is defined as a blood glucose level of less than 50 mg/dl.
- Hypoglycemia can occur when an individual takes too much insulin or other hypoglycemic mediations.
- Hypoglycemia can happen after a strenuous workout while not correctly balancing either the medications or the energy output with diet intake.
- Hypoglycemia can occur anytime of the day or night; symptoms may occur suddenly and without warning.
- Signs and symptoms of hypoglycemia include sweating, tachycardia, nervousness, hunger and occasional palpitations.
- Other signs and symptoms are headache, inability to concentrate, confusion, slurred speech, numbness and tingling in the lips and tongue, emotional changes and erratic behaviour.
- In some cases, a patient may not be able to speak, and, if they do, it may not make sense.
• Treatment for hypoglycemia is to supplement the patient with a source of sugar.

• If the patient can follow commands, fruit juice or regular soda, hard candies, or two teaspoons of sugar or honey may be administered.

• If the patient is unable to swallow and has a patent IV, then one ampoule of D50 is usually sufficient to raise the blood glucose.

• Never give juice or soda through an IV – this would destroy the vein and surrounding tissue and seriously harm the patient!

• Also, remember that if hard candy or lifesavers are administered, the patient must be alert enough not to choke on them.

• All nurses should develop and maintain the competencies and resources to care for and educate their diabetic patients.

References

Avoiding Common Nursing Errors, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010.

Note: A narrated e-Learning module of this Nugget is available at LearningNurse.com.