

Reducing harm from high-risk medicines



Insulin

What is it for?

Insulin helps move glucose from your blood into the cells of your body to make energy. If the glucose can't get into your cells, it will stay in the blood and slowly damage your blood vessels, nerves, eyes, kidneys and heart. You will also lose energy.

What is its name?

There are many different insulins and it is important you remember the name of the insulin you use. Write it down, or ask for a yellow medication card or something similar unless you have access to an electronic list of your medicines.

How and when do I take it?

Insulin is given by subcutaneous injection or by infusion using a pump. There are insulins that work for a short time and others that work for longer, and some have both short- and long-acting insulin together.

The time to give your insulin injections depends on the type of insulin you use and your meal times, as well as your blood sugar level.

How long do I need to take it for?

Once started on insulin, it is needed for the rest of your life.

What could happen if I stop using it?

You are likely to get a high blood sugar level (hyper, hyperglycaemia). As your blood sugar level gets higher you are likely to feel thirsty, feel sick or be sick, go to the toilet often to pass water, feel more tired, have blurred vision, get dry skin and develop ketonuria (ketones in your urine). If your high blood sugar level is not treated you will become unconscious and go into a coma.

What are the side effects? What should I do if I get these?

If too much or too little insulin is given in relation to food and exercise, you can get side effects, such as a low (hypo, hypoglycaemia) or a high blood sugar level (hyper, hyperglycaemia). A hypo may cause blurred vision, pins and needles on the lips and tongue, hunger, pounding heart, turning pale, sweaty skin, headache, light headedness, trembling hands and weak and trembling knees. Some people feel confused, anxious or irritable as well. You should always carry something sugary with you for when you get a low blood sugar. Injection site side effects, such as fatty lumps, can happen if the site used to inject your insulin is not changed each day.

Talk to your pharmacist (chemist) or health professional for more information about insulin, what to do if you have hypoglycaemia or hyperglycaemia, blood sugar testing and your meter.

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