

Diabetes Medications: *Sulfonylureas*

What are sulfonylureas?

Sulfonylureas are medications used to treat type 2 diabetes. They're taken by mouth (orally) as a pill. Sulfonylureas work best when you're following the rest of your diabetes treatment plan. This means checking your blood glucose regularly, following your meal plan, and exercising every day. It may also include taking other diabetes medications.

What do they do?

Sulfonylureas help to lower the amount of glucose in your bloodstream (your blood glucose). They do this by **increasing the amount of insulin released by your pancreas**. With more insulin to “unlock” your body's cells, more glucose can move into them. Your blood glucose goes down.

Why is this medication important for my health?

Sulfonylureas can't cure your diabetes. But by helping control your blood glucose, they lower the chance that your diabetes will cause serious problems.

As you know, when you have diabetes, you tend to have high blood glucose. Over time, this can damage your blood vessels and nerves, leading to heart attack or stroke, kidney and eye disease, and problems with your teeth, feet, and skin. If you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol — like many people with diabetes — you have an even greater risk for these problems. (This is why you should always take your blood pressure or cholesterol medications as well as your diabetes medications.)



Some examples of sulfonylurea medication are **glipizide XL (Glucotrol XL)** and **glimepiride (Amaryl)**. Like other diabetes medications, sulfonylureas work best when you follow the rest of your diabetes treatment plan.

Sulfonylureas and...

...**weight gain**. Most people gain a few pounds while on sulfonylureas. Stick to your exercise and meal plan.

...**alcohol**. Drinking even a little bit of alcohol can cause a red flush on your face, neck, and arms. This isn't harmful. But it is a good reminder that you need to be careful about how you include alcohol in your meal plan. Ask your doctor or diabetes educators about this.

The back page of this handout gives more complete guidelines for taking your sulfonylurea medication.

Guidelines for taking a sulfonylurea

You should always follow your doctor's specific instructions for taking any medication, including a sulfonylurea. But there are some general rules that will probably apply to you:

- **Take glimepride (Amaryl) with a meal.**
- **Take an extended-release glipizide (Glucotrol XL) at the same time every day,** regardless of when you eat. Also, make sure you swallow this medication whole. Don't chew, crush, or break it.
- **Take all other sulfonylureas 30 minutes before you eat a main meal.**
- **Be patient.** You need to be on this medication about 2 weeks before you'll see its full effect of lowering your blood glucose.
- **Watch out for the sun.** Your medication can make you more sensitive to sunlight. Use sunscreen and sunglasses outside—and stay out of tanning salons.
- **If your symptoms go away, or you decide you feel fine now, don't stop taking your sulfonylurea.** You need this medication to stay well.
- **If you forget to take a dose, take it as soon as you remember.** If it's already time for your next dose, just take the usual amount. Do NOT double your dose.
- **If you're sick, most of the time you should keep taking your sulfonylurea as prescribed.** Test your blood glucose more often. Call your doctor for instructions if you can't keep your blood glucose within safe ranges.
- **If you plan to become pregnant or breastfeed, talk to your doctor.** Not all sulfonylureas are approved for use during pregnancy. You shouldn't use a sulfonylurea while you're breastfeeding, either.

My medication (name): _____

Strength (mg per pill): _____

How much to take / when to take: _____

Other instructions: _____

What are the side effects?

Sulfonylureas can sometimes cause **hypoglycemia** (low blood glucose), especially when you exercise vigorously or don't eat enough. Since low blood glucose can be dangerous, make sure that you and your family know the symptoms. These include shakiness, fast heartbeat, weakness, crankiness, hunger, headache, anxiety, or dizziness. If you have these symptoms, take in some quick-acting sugar. Good sources are 3 to 4 glucose tablets, or half a cup of fruit juice or regular soda.

Sulfonylureas can also cause an upset stomach. Less often, they cause a skin rash. Call your doctor if you have either of these side effects.

When to call or see your doctor

- You have questions about how to take your medication.
- You're thinking about stopping your medication. (Never stop without talking to your doctor first.)
- You're ill and having trouble controlling your blood glucose.
- You have an upset stomach or skin rash that you think might be caused by your sulfonylurea medication.