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Perspective

Metformin and Its Complex Effects Beyond Glucose Control

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DESCRIPTION

Metformin is widely recognized as a first-line pharmacological treatment for type 2 diabetes mellitus due to its proven efficacy in reducing blood glucose levels and improving overall glycemic control. Its ability to enhance insulin sensitivity, reduce hepatic glucose production, and promote modest weight loss has made it a cornerstone of diabetes management worldwide. Despite its extensive use and favorable safety profile, it is crucial to acknowledge that metformin is not without potential adverse effects. These unintended reactions, although often manageable, can influence treatment adherence and patient outcomes, particularly in certain vulnerable populations. Understanding these effects is essential for healthcare providers to optimize therapy and ensure patient safety.

Among the most frequently reported side effects of metformin are gastrointestinal disturbances. Symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal discomfort are common, particularly during the initiation of therapy or following rapid dose escalation. These reactions, while typically transient, can be distressing and interfere with patients' daily activities. In some cases, persistent gastrointestinal upset may lead to discontinuation of therapy, which in turn can compromise glycemic control. To minimize these effects, clinicians often recommend a gradual titration of the drug, starting with a low dose and increasing it incrementally. Additionally, taking metformin with meals may help alleviate some of the gastrointestinal discomfort, improving tolerability and adherence.

A rare but potentially serious complication associated with metformin use is lactic acidosis. This condition results from the accumulation of lactic acid in the bloodstream, leading to symptoms such as generalized weakness, rapid breathing, abdominal pain, and confusion. Lactic acidosis is a medical emergency and can be life-threatening if not promptly recognized and treated. The risk of developing lactic acidosis is significantly higher in individuals with impaired renal function, hepatic insufficiency, or excessive alcohol consumption, as these conditions can disrupt the normal metabolism and clearance of

lactic acid. Regular assessment of kidney and liver function, along with patient education regarding early warning signs, is essential to reduce the likelihood of this rare adverse event.

Another important consideration in long-term metformin therapy is its impact on vitamin B12 levels. Chronic use of metformin has been associated with decreased absorption of vitamin B12, potentially leading to deficiency over time. Vitamin B12 deficiency may manifest as fatigue, weakness, numbness, or neuropathic symptoms, which can sometimes mimic the peripheral neuropathy commonly seen in diabetes. Periodic monitoring of serum B12 levels, particularly in patients on long-term metformin therapy, is recommended. In cases of deficiency, supplementation can prevent complications and improve quality of life, while ensuring that diabetic symptoms are not misattributed.

Although hypoglycemia is generally uncommon with metformin monotherapy due to its insulin-sensitizing rather than insulin-stimulating effects, low blood sugar episodes may occur when it is combined with other glucose-lowering agents, such as sulfonylureas or insulin. Additionally, hypoglycemia can arise in patients with irregular meal patterns or prolonged fasting. Patient education on recognizing and managing hypoglycemia, including awareness of early warning signs like dizziness, sweating, or confusion, is essential to maintaining safe and effective glycemic control. Renal function plays a critical role in the safe use of metformin. Impaired kidney function can reduce drug clearance, leading to higher systemic concentrations and increased risk of adverse effects, including lactic acidosis.

CONCLUSION

Some patients may experience mild neurological symptoms, including headaches or dizziness, although these reactions are less common. Such manifestations underscore the importance of individualized patient monitoring and dose adjustments in susceptible individuals. Gastrointestinal disturbances, lactic acidosis, vitamin B12 deficiency, hypoglycemia, and renal considerations are among the most important factors to monitor. Patient education, routine laboratory monitoring, and

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personalized treatment adjustments are key strategies to ensure optimal therapy while minimizing unwanted reactions. By recognizing the full spectrum of metformin's effects, healthcare

providers can support long-term adherence, safeguard patient health, and maximize the therapeutic benefits of this essential medication.