

Syncope (Fainting)

What is syncope?

Syncope is the medical term for 'fainting'. Fainting is a brief, sudden loss of consciousness. Fainting is commonly seen in school aged children and teenagers. Fainting can be caused by many things, but "vasovagal" syncope (also called reflex-mediated or neurocardiogenic syncope) is the most common type and may be triggered by certain settings. In most cases, fainting is NOT a sign of a dangerous condition. In vasovagal syncope, a trigger causes the heart rate and blood pressure to drop suddenly. This causes the brain to not get enough blood or oxygen for a short period of time and causes the person to faint. When a person faints, they usually fall over and/or lie down which makes it easier for the blood to get back to the brain, as it no longer has to move against gravity to reach the brain from the heart. The most for vasovagal syncope is pooling of blood in the lower half of your body, such as after you have been sitting or lying down for a long period of time.

What causes it?

There are many different triggers that can cause a fainting episode, these include:

- Dehydration from not drinking enough
- Hot or warm environments
- Standing for long periods
- Standing up too fast
- Stressful situations, such as seeing blood or getting a needle
- Hunger from not eating properly, especially in the morning
- Lack of activity (weak muscles)
- Hair-pulling
- After exercise
- Hormones during teenage years

How will you feel?

It is common to have “warning signs” before fainting, these include:

- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness
- Nausea
- Changes in vision (spots or dark vision)
- Feeling hot or cold
- Hearing muffled/ringing sounds
- Looking pale
- Feeling heart rate going fast or slow

It is also common for others to observe some stiffening or seizure-like activity while you are unconscious. It is common to feel tired after fainting.

What to do?

As soon as you feel like you may faint:

- Lie down flat immediately – do not fight it! this step is very important
- Once lying down, you may raise your legs above the ground, using a chair or pillow for support
- Remain in this position until the symptoms go away (this will likely be several minutes)
- After you are feeling better, get up slowly (for example, go from lying to sitting, wait and then slowly go from sitting to standing)

Recovery is often quick, but some people may take longer to recover than others. It is normal to feel weak or disoriented afterwards. This will get better in time.

How to prevent it?

There are simple ways to prevent fainting. Some strategies include:

- Stay well hydrated. Aim for at least 2L of fluids per day. Your urine should be a light yellow color. Drink even more when physically active.
- Minimize caffeine. Limit coffee and tea, and avoid energy drinks entirely. Do not limit salt. Consider increasing intake by adding 1–5 grams (up to 1 tsp) to your food throughout the day.
- Eat small, frequent snacks. This is often helpful. Do not skip breakfast.
- Continue regular physical activity. This strengthens leg muscles to help pump blood back to the heart. Ensure you warm up and cool down.
- Avoid staying in one position for too long without changing position. If standing, flex your legs often. Exercises such as placing your elbows out to the sides, interlocking your fingers and pulling to stretch your arms or crossing your legs and squeezing your knees together (as though trying to squeeze a coin between your kneecap and the back of your leg) can help when sitting or standing for a long time.
- Avoid long hot showers, saunas, and hot tubs.
- Get up gradually. Instead of jumping out of bed, sit up first and move your legs before standing.

When do I need to seek medical attention?

If you have another similar type of fainting episode that does not result in an injury, it is not necessary to go to the hospital or to call 911.

In a very small number of children, fainting may be caused by a reason other than vasovagal syncope. You need to see your physician if:

- Fainting occurs during or in the middle of activity (before you have a chance to stop the activity)
- You have tried the suggestions above and are still having fainting
- Fainting occurs unpredictably and in dangerous situations
- You have a family history of unexplained sudden death in young people