

Syncope (Fainting)

What is syncope?

Syncope, commonly known as fainting or “passing out,” is a temporary loss of consciousness and muscle control due to a sudden, brief decrease in blood flow to the brain. Syncope is common in kids with a peak in teenage years. Up to 3% of pediatric emergency room visits are due to syncope. Greater than 95% of syncopal episodes in kids are benign with the majority being due to vasovagal (also termed neurally-mediated, neurocardiogenic, or reflex-mediated) syncope. While identifying kids with the potential for a cardiovascular cause is imperative, the majority of cases can be managed with reassurance and lifestyle changes in the setting of a typical history of vasovagal syncope, normal cardiac examination, and reassuring personal and family history. Most fainting episodes are harmless and can be avoided using the tips and tricks below. Rarely, fainting can indicate more serious underlying medical conditions, especially if it is unpredictable or in the middle of exercise.

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