



Syncope

This sheet gives an overview of syncope (fainting), its causes, and treatment options.

Key points

- Syncope is also called fainting. It happens when the brain doesn't get enough blood.
- In most cases, syncope is a harmless event. In rare cases, it's a sign of a serious heart problem.
- Your child should see a doctor to make sure they do not have a heart problem. We can do this with minimal testing.

What is syncope?

- Syncope is the medical word for a loss of consciousness that doesn't last very long, and that's not a seizure.
- Many young people have *vasovagal syncope*. This is when you faint because your body overacts to a specific trigger, like the sight of blood.

What causes syncope?

- Syncope happens when the blood supply to the brain is stopped for a short time by a drop in blood pressure (see figure 1). This usually happens because of dehydration (not enough water in the body) or a sudden change in position.

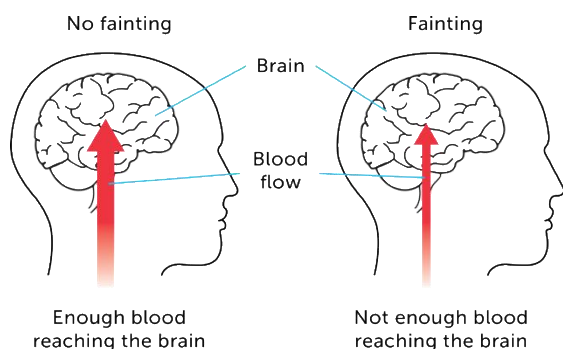


Figure 1.

What are the symptoms of syncope?

- Most people have warning signs before they faint, like dizziness, flushing (turning red), vision changes, or nausea. Paying attention to these warning signs and lying down or sitting down can often prevent fainting.
- An episode of syncope usually lasts only a few seconds. Your child may be confused for a short time after waking up again. They should be back to normal within a few minutes.

How is syncope diagnosed?

- **Your child should be seen right away by a pediatric cardiologist if syncope happens:**
 - While your child is exercising
 - If your child has heart disease
 - If there is a family history of arrhythmia (abnormal heart rhythm) or sudden death
- Your child's health care provider will ask questions about your child's fainting episodes to find out whether they seem dangerous or not.
- Your child may have an electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG). This is a simple test that helps find heart problems in people who have fainted.
- Your child's health care provider will let you know if more tests are needed.

How is syncope prevented?

- **Have your child drink more fluids.** They should drink enough water so that their midday urine (pee) is clear in color every day.
- **Give your child salty snacks to eat,** as they help the body to hold on to the water your child drinks. Your child may also drink electrolyte supplements or sports drinks. Ask your health care provider if this is a good idea for your child.
- **Avoid caffeine** or cut it down to a small amount.
- **Change body position slowly,** especially after sitting or lying down for a long time.
- **Stay as active as possible** once your child's health care provider says it's OK. Exercise cuts down on how often syncope happens.
- **Take time to warm up and cool down when exercising.** Stopping exercise suddenly can lead to fainting because of a drop in blood pressure.
- **Have your child lie down for a few minutes with their legs raised if they feel faint or after they faint.** This gives their body time to recover and keeps them from fainting (or fainting again).
- If your child faints often, they can **take medications** to increase blood pressure.
- **Managing stress and anxiety, getting enough sleep, and taking good care of any other chronic health problems** lowers syncope risk.

- **Learn what your child's triggers are and try to avoid them.** Triggers can include:
 - Hot baths or showers
 - Long periods of exercise
 - Physical pain
 - Seeing blood
 - Seeing something upsetting

What possible problems should I watch out for?

- **Syncope has a risk of injury.** Know your child's warning signs and have them lie down or sit down if they think they might faint.
- **Tell your child's health care provider right away if they have an episode:**
 - After a rapid or not normal heartbeat
 - After having chest pain
 - When exercising or after being startled or emotionally distressed
 - With seizure-like activity (jerking arms or legs, a stiff body)
 - With loss of bowel or bladder control

What should I do if my child has a problem or emergency?

- Syncope is usually not an emergency.
- Your child should be seen in an emergency room if they're not recovering quickly from an episode or if they were injured because of it.
- **If your child is unconscious with no pulse, is not breathing or not breathing normally, start CPR and call 911 or your local emergency number.**

What does having syncope mean for the future?

- Syncope is a sign of a serious heart problem only in rare cases.
- For most children, the problem is worst around puberty and gets better as they get older. The focus is usually on treating symptoms and preventing injury.
- Keeping normal routines, including regular school attendance, is a priority when treating syncope.

Contact us

- **For routine questions Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.:** Please call the Cardiology clinic at 617-355-2079.
- **After hours or if your call is urgent:** Call Boston Children's page operator at 617-355-6369 and ask to page the cardiologist-on-call.