

Fainting and collapse

WHAT IS FAINTING?

Fainting is when you become unconscious or 'black out' for a brief period. You may collapse to the floor and may have a brief period of twitching while collapsed. Fainting is caused by a sudden drop in blood pressure (hypotension), which results in less blood flow to the brain. Brain cells depend on a good blood flow to supply oxygen and nutrients and react quickly when this supply is reduced or cut off.

Most faints do not cause any harm and recovery is fast. However, fainting can also indicate a serious medical problem. If the faint happened while you were sitting or lying down, you have a fit (seizure), chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, sudden and severe headache or other worrying symptoms, you should seek urgent medical care.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

You may have warning signs just before you faint:

- feeling dizzy or light-headed
- a pale face
- sweating
- nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting
- stomach ache
- weakness
- numbness and tingling
- blurred or faded vision
- anxiety and restlessness.

Faints usually last only a few seconds, and recovery can take a few minutes. You may also vomit while recovering.

TYPES OF COLLAPSE

Heat, emotional distress or pain can cause a faint. Other triggers include standing for a long time, the

sight of blood or an alarming event. People who faint are often young and otherwise healthy.

Another type of collapse is postural hypotension. This can happen when you stand up quickly, particularly if you have been sitting or lying down for a long time (as blood can pool in your legs through gravity). Tiredness and dehydration may make this worse. Low blood pressure is more common in older people and can be caused by medications (especially those to reduce blood pressure) and health problems.

Sometimes a collapse is triggered by a more serious event (such as a heart attack or stroke). You will be assessed for serious causes of collapse.

TREATMENT

You will be assessed by a doctor and asked about your medical history. Tests may be needed to exclude serious causes of collapse and may include:

- blood glucose (sugar) level and blood tests
- an ECG – electrical tracing of the heart
- x-rays (especially if you have injured yourself after collapsing).

Treatment may be as simple as observation to make sure you recover fully. You may need intravenous (into the vein) fluids or medications. If the likely cause is your medication, the doctor may advise you to stop taking it, reduce the dose or change it to another medication.

HOME CARE

Be guided by your doctor, but some general advice includes:

- Do not drive until you are fully recovered.
- Stay with someone until you feel better.

- Drink plenty of water (unless you have been advised not to), have regular meals and get enough rest.
- When changing position, do so slowly.
- When you wake in the morning sit on the edge of the bed for a few moments before standing.
- Avoid any known triggers (such as standing too quickly, dehydration, hot showers and prolonged bed rest).

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FEEL FAINT

- Lie down with your feet higher than your head.
- Remain in the position for about 10 minutes or until you feel better.
- Have a glass of water.
- Get some fresh air.
- If you faint more than once or while sitting or lying, are aged over 60, have a history of heart problems or have worrying symptoms such as severe headache or new bleeding you must see a doctor immediately.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- While a faint can be alarming, most causes are harmless and the problem goes away on its own. It may be a one-off event.
- Symptoms may be more serious in the elderly and can recur, increasing the risk of falls and injury. Fainting may simply be due to ageing blood vessels and nerves.

FOLLOW-UP

See your local doctor if you have any problems or concerns. You may need to be assessed for an underlying health problem. Your doctor can discuss treatment options.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

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