

Common Fainting Spells

(Vasovagal Syncope)

Common fainting spells are short losses of consciousness caused by a drop in blood pressure and heart rate. They are usually not dangerous.

What are common fainting spells?

The medical term for common fainting spells is vasovagal syncope (vae-zo-VA-gal SYNC-KA-pee). They are a sudden drop in blood pressure and heart rate. This causes blood flow to the brain to decrease, causing a short loss or decrease in consciousness. Common fainting spells are not usually dangerous.

When this happens, most people will slump over or fall. Some people have a few jerks of their body, arms or legs after falling.

What causes a fainting spell?

The autonomic nervous system is the system in the brain that regulates breathing, blood pressure and heartrate. This system controls these functions without you even having to think about it. If something goes wrong with the autonomic nervous system, your heart rate and blood pressure can decrease. When this happens, your brain does not get enough blood flow and oxygen for a short period. This can cause you to faint. Fainting is the brain's way of preventing itself from being damaged.

What can trigger a fainting spell?

Things that can trigger fainting include:

- Stress or fear
- Pain (like a needle poke from a blood draw)
- Dehydration
- Fatigue
- Standing for long periods of time
- Standing up too quickly after sitting or lying down for long periods of time
- Being in warm environments (like hot weather or a hot shower)
- Stretching, especially while tilting the head back

What are the warning signs?

Before fainting, most people have some or all of these symptoms:

- Dizziness
- Warmth or tingling over the whole body
- Nausea
- Weakness, especially in the legs
- Vision changes

If you start having these symptoms, it is a warning sign and you need to take action right away to prevent fainting.

To Learn More

- Heart Center
206-987-2015
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

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How can I prevent fainting?

- Drink a lot of fluid, at least 60-80 ounces every day. Drinking will help to maintain your blood volume. Water or sports drinks, such as Gatorade are best. Soda is not a good choice, since it can actually dehydrate you more.
- Drink water more often, at least 100 ounces every day, if exercising or in warm weather.
- Check your urine color. It should be clear, not yellow or dark. If it is not clear, you are becoming dehydrated and should drink more liquid.
- Change positions slowly. Get up slowly from a sitting to standing position.
- Move around when you are standing so that you do not stay in one position for a long period of time.

When you feel or see the symptoms and warning signs, take action fast:

- Lay flat, if at all possible
- If you are sitting and are not able to lie down, bend over and put your head between your knees.
- If you are standing and cannot sit or lay down, bend your knees or squat to increase blood flow to your upper body.
- Eat a salty snack, like pretzels, popcorn, peanuts or pickles.

Usually these steps can prevent fainting. The symptoms and warning signs may still happen, but these should prevent fainting if you take action early.

What should I do if I faint?

- If you faint, stay lying down for a while so your body can recover. Do not try to sit or stand up right away. Your body needs time to recover or you will faint again. When you feel ready, slowly sit up and let your body adjust before you stand up.
- People do not usually need medicine or medical tests for common fainting spells.
- If you continue to faint, call your healthcare provider. They will help you decide if you need medicine, medical tests or a referral to a specialist.
- If you pass out during exercise or physical activity, call your healthcare provider immediately. This can be a sign of something else and further medical attention may be needed.