

Syncope (fainting or passing out)



What is syncope?

Syncope is better known as fainting or passing out. It is a loss of consciousness and muscle tone. Syncope is caused by a sudden decrease in blood flow to the head. It is often triggered by growth spurts and puberty. Most children stop fainting as they get older.

What are the symptoms?

Children who faint often feel dizzy or lightheaded. They may have a spinning feeling called vertigo. Many children:

- Feel sick to their stomachs.
- Have a change in vision, such as seeing black spots or feeling like they are looking into a tunnel.
- Feel weak.
- Sweat.
- Have trouble hearing.
- Look pale.

What are the causes?

Neurocardiogenic (or Vasovagal) syncope. This is the most common cause of fainting in a child. It is not harmful.

Your child may faint when the heart rate slows down or the blood vessels enlarge. This type can be caused by:

- Warm temperatures.
- Anxiety.
- Sudden surprise.
- Fear of getting a shot or needle poke.
- Bearing down, such as when trying to poop.
- Confined spaces.

Orthostatic hypotension. This is another common cause of fainting. It is not harmful. Blood collects in the legs and causes low blood pressure, which slows down blood flow to the head. It usually happens when a child:

- Has been standing for a long time.
- Changes position quickly.
- Is dehydrated.

Heart problems. This is **not** common. It can be caused by an abnormal heart rhythm or a problem with the heart's structure.

Other causes of syncope are head injuries, seizures, pain, breath holding, and low blood sugar.

How is it diagnosed?

The healthcare provider will do an exam. You and your child will be asked about symptoms. These details are important to help find the cause. Other tests that may be done include:

- Blood pressure.
- EKG to check the heart's electrical rhythm.
- Echocardiogram to check the heart's function and structure.
- Tilt table test—your child's healthcare provider will explain this test to you if it is needed.

How can fainting be prevented?

If your child feels dizzy:

- Have them sit down or lie down right away. If sitting, have your child put their head between the knees. This will help force blood back to the head.

If your child has fainted:

- Lay them down on a flat surface.
- Raise your child's feet slightly using a pillow or other object.

Have your child:

- **Avoid dehydration.** Your child should drink at least 8 to 10 glasses of water throughout the day. More water is needed in hot weather or during exercise. Tell your child not to wait until getting thirsty to drink. Urine should be pale yellow or almost clear if your child is drinking enough water.
- Children may drink Gatorade® or other sports drinks when they are active and have been sweating.
- Increase salt in the diet as directed by your child's healthcare provider. Salt helps the body hold on to water. Add the extra salt to your child's regular food. Give your child a salty snack, such as pretzels or pickles.
- Avoid caffeine.
- Eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Your child should not skip meals.
- Get enough sleep at night.

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child:

- Faints during exercise or with activity.
- Has special health care needs that were not covered in this sheet.

This sheet was created to help you care for your child or family member. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.