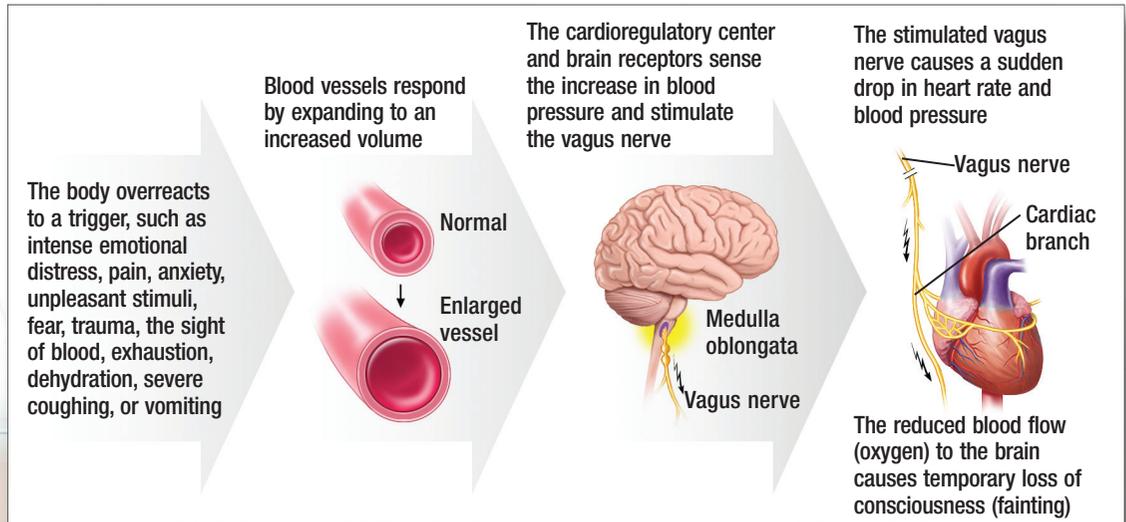


Syncope



Fainting

Syncope is a medical term for fainting or briefly losing consciousness. This condition is caused by a sudden slowing of blood flow to the brain. Syncope is a common occurrence, but it can be frightening. The best treatment for a person who feels faint is to lie down for several minutes until the feeling passes. An episode of syncope is usually over quickly and is followed by a complete recovery. Although syncope can occur in a person without health problems, repeated episodes of syncope can be a sign of a more serious condition of the heart, nervous system, or blood volume.

After a Fainting Episode, a Doctor Should Be Consulted for Evaluation

Many people have experienced a fainting spell at some point. An episode of syncope is especially common in older people, although it can occur in anyone and at any age.

Characteristics of Syncope

The most frequent cause of fainting is a sudden drop in blood pressure. This can occur as a result of quickly moving from lying down or sitting to a standing position. This is often the cause of syncope in older adults. Other sources of fainting include straining while coughing or going to the bathroom, standing still for a long time, or taking certain medications. Some people feel faint when they are scared, distressed, anxious, hungry, overheated, or in pain. Hyperventilation and low blood sugar can cause a person to faint. Heart problems or stroke also can precipitate fainting.

Before an episode of syncope, the person may feel weak, dizzy, hot, nauseated, or clammy. Often vision is blurry or unfocused, as if looking at a white, gray, or black screen. Weakness in the legs can lead to a fall or collapse. After losing consciousness, the person recovers in a few minutes and is alert again.

What to Do if an Episode Occurs

Immediate treatment for someone who has fainted is to check his or her breathing to confirm that the airways are clear. The person should lie down, or if that is impossible, sit with the head between the knees. This position should be continued for several minutes until the symptoms pass. If the person has any other symptoms, such as chest pain or problems seeing or speaking, medical attention should be sought without delay.

After an episode of syncope, it is a good idea to see a doctor to investigate the cause. If a person faints frequently, a history of what happens just before fainting could help determine whether there is a trigger that can be avoided. This is especially true if a person faints after exercising, during emotional stress, or after a large meal. Blood tests, ECG, exercise stress testing, and blood pressure checks in various positions (tilt-table test) can help identify a cause for the syncope. Often, however, no cause can be determined.

How to Avoid Future Episodes

Depending on the situation, specific steps can be taken to avoid syncope. It may be helpful to drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration and to eat several smaller meals each day while refraining from sugary foods, caffeine, and alcohol. If a trigger is identified, the triggering situation should be avoided. Compression stockings may be useful to prevent blood from pooling in the legs. Another drug could be substituted for medication that might be causing fainting or low blood pressure. Relaxation techniques can slow the heart rate. For some people, counterpressure exercises such as squeezing a rubber ball, crossing the arms, or squeezing the legs and thighs together are helpful if performed when symptoms first appear.

For most people, a single episode of syncope with a complete recovery is not serious. If syncope is a chronic problem, a person should avoid situations that trigger it. For some people, simply moving slowly to a standing position from lying down or sitting will prevent syncope.



© Johnson Medical Information LLC, 2016

The most common cause of syncope is a sudden drop in blood pressure, but other factors, such as medical conditions, exercise, and emotional stress, can be triggers.