

VASOVAGAL and SITUATIONAL SYNCOPE

What is syncope?

Syncope is a medical term for what is commonly known as fainting. It is a sudden, brief loss of consciousness and occurs when not enough blood flows to the brain; which results in the person fainting (going limp and falling down). Usually after they fall down, the blood flow to the brain rapidly improves and most people recover quickly from the episode. Most syncope is not caused by any underlying serious illness.



Vasovagal syncope (also called “reflex syncope”) is the medical term used to describe a specific type of syncope in which your body over-reacts to a trigger (such as pain, emotional distress, fear). As a result there is a rapid drop in your blood pressure and heart rate. Not enough blood gets to your brain and you faint. Vasovagal syncope is not dangerous. Some ways to help avoid fainting are listed below.

In **situational syncope** the process is the same but the triggers are bodily functions such as coughing, urinating, straining, laughing.

How can you avoid fainting?

- Avoid sitting or standing for long periods.
 - When you do have to stand still for a long time, clench and unclench your calf muscles, or rock forward and back on the balls of your feet to promote blood flow.
 - If sitting for a long time, cross legs and gently tighten leg or gluteal muscles. Do this before standing.
- If possible, avoid situations that cause you to faint (e.g., large crowds, warm places). If you are unable to avoid these situations, see the section below for how to manage when you feel you are about to faint.
- Do not stand up or sit down or bend over suddenly. Take pauses when you are changing positions.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.
- Avoid excess alcohol.



What to do if you are about to faint?

You may know that you tend to faint at certain times, such as when you have an injection or get blood taken. You may also have feelings of warmth, dizziness, sweating, or being sick to your stomach just before you faint. Here are some steps you can take to help avoid fainting:

- Sit down immediately. Put your head between your knees.
- If possible, lie down flat and raise your legs against a wall.
- In milder episodes tense and untense your stomach, arm and leg muscles. You can try squatting or leg crossing to stop the symptoms from getting worse.



What to tell family and friends to do when you faint?

- Loosen any tight clothing around the neck.
- Keep you lying down for about 10 minutes – preferably in a cool and quiet space with feet elevated about 30 centimeters.
- If any vomiting, turn onto side to prevent choking.
- If any trouble breathing or taking longer than expected to get better, call 911.



When should you contact your doctor?

- You are unable to prevent fainting and continue to have fainting episodes.

Call 911 if you have symptoms of a possible heart problem (e.g., chest pain or pressure, severe trouble breathing, a fast or irregular heartbeat).

Sources: **1)** MyHealth.Alberta.ca Network. “Fainting.” Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ycequtau>. **2)** Falls and Syncope Service Royal Victoria Infirmary. The Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals. “Information for patients with vasovagal syncope.” Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y9pty44f>; **3)** MyHealth.Alberta.ca Network. “Vasovagal syncope: care instructions.” Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ychfqfgz>.

