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Syncope

Other names: fainting, passing out

What is syncope?

Syncope, or fainting, is a sudden, temporary loss of consciousness.

What causes syncope?

Syncope is caused by a temporary decrease in the flow of blood to the brain. A large number of situations or conditions can cause this decrease in blood flow. They can include: straining for a prolonged period, common mild illnesses like cold and flu, standing up quickly, emotional stress, heart disease, standing rigidly for a long time, arrhythmias (abnormal heart beats), pain, fright, drugs and alcohol.

Certain heart conditions can cause syncope. They include heart attacks, certain arrhythmias (irregular heartbeats), hypertropic cardiomyopathy (a rare disease that involves a "thickening" of the heart muscle), disorders of the heart valves, or heart block (a problem with the heart's electrical system that produces very slow heart beats).

How is the cause of syncope diagnosed?

The doctor will start with a thorough physical exam and review of your medical history. The doctor may recommend certain diagnostic tests to determine the cause of your fainting episodes. These tests might include: X-rays, use of a Holter monitor (a device that you wear during the day that records the electrical activity over a period of time), or other diagnostic or imaging testing procedures.

Your doctor might recommend a "tilt-table test". This test involves a special table that tilts upright. Sometimes, medications are given during the test to help with the diagnosis.

How is syncope treated?

Treatment depends on the cause of the fainting spells. If the problems are related to a heart condition, then the heart condition is treated. If the problem is related to medications, the doctor may change the dosage or the type of medication. Medications are generally not required to treat syncope, but they might be required to treat the cause of syncope.

Most fainting spells are not dangerous. Individuals usually regain consciousness on their own in a few minutes.