

# Fainting and collapse

## What is fainting?

Fainting is when you become unconscious or 'black out' for a brief period. You may collapse to the floor and may have a brief period of twitching while collapsed. Fainting is caused by a sudden drop in blood pressure (hypotension), which results in less blood flow to the brain. Brain cells depend on a good blood flow to supply oxygen and nutrients and react quickly when this supply is reduced or cut off.

Most faints do not cause any harm and recovery is fast. However, fainting can also indicate a serious medical problem. If the faint happened while you were sitting or lying down, during exertion or exercise, or if you have a fit (seizure), chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, sudden and severe headache or other worrying symptoms, you should seek urgent medical care.

## What are the symptoms?

You may have warning signs just before you faint:

- Feeling dizzy or light-headed
- A pale face
- Sweating
- Nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting
- Stomach ache
- Weakness
- Numbness and tingling
- Blurred or faded vision
- Anxiety and restlessness

Faints usually last only a few seconds, and recovery can take a few minutes. You may also vomit while recovering.

## Types of collapse

Heat, emotional distress or pain can cause a faint. Other triggers include standing for a long time, the sight of blood or an alarming event. People who faint are often young and otherwise healthy.

Another type of collapse is postural hypotension. This can happen when you stand up quickly, particularly if you have been sitting or lying down for a long time (as blood can pool in your legs through gravity). Tiredness and dehydration may make this worse. Low blood pressure is more common in older people and can be caused by medications (especially those to reduce blood pressure) and health problems.

**Alan, Ada and Eva Selwyn Emergency Department**  
24 hours, 7 days a week  
183 Wattletree Road, Malvern, VIC 3144  
(03) 9508 1500 | [www.cabrini.com.au](http://www.cabrini.com.au)

Sometimes a collapse is triggered by a more serious event - such as a heart attack or arrhythmia (abnormal heart beat). You will be assessed for serious causes of collapse.

## Treatment

You will be assessed by a doctor and asked about your medical history. Tests may be needed to exclude serious causes of collapse and may include:

- Blood glucose (sugar) level and blood tests
- An ECG – electrical tracing of the heart
- X-rays (especially if you have injured yourself after collapsing)

Treatment may be as simple as observation to make sure you recover fully. You may need intravenous (into the vein) fluids or medications. If the likely cause is your medication, the doctor may advise you to stop taking it, reduce the dose or change it to another medication.

## Home care

Be guided by your doctor, but some general advice includes:

- Do not drive until you are fully recovered
- Stay with someone until you feel better
- Drink plenty of water (unless you have been advised not to), have regular meals and get enough rest
- When changing position, do so slowly
- When you wake in the morning sit on the edge of the bed for a few moments before standing
- Avoid any known triggers (such as standing too quickly, dehydration, hot showers and prolonged bed rest)

## What to do if you feel faint

- Lie down with your feet higher than your head
- Remain in the position for about 10 minutes or until you feel better
- Have a glass of water
- Get some fresh air
- If you faint more than once or while sitting or lying, are aged over 60, have a history of heart problems or have worrying symptoms such as severe headache or new bleeding you must see a doctor immediately

### What to expect

- While a faint can be alarming, most causes are harmless and the problem goes away on its own. It may be a one-off event.
- Symptoms may be more serious in the elderly and can recur, increasing the risk of falls and injury. Fainting may simply be due to ageing blood vessels and nerves.

### Follow-up

See your local doctor if you have any problems or concerns. You may need to be assessed for an underlying health problem. Your doctor can discuss treatment options, review your medications or arrange an occupational therapist (OT) to review your home to ensure it is safe.

### Seeking help

**Cabrini Emergency Department (ED)** is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

### Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)