

What is Syncope?

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Syncope (sin-ko-pea) is a brief loss of consciousness, or fainting. Syncope occurs when there is not enough oxygen flowing through your blood and into your brain. It may be related to a sudden fall in blood pressure, changes in the heart rhythm, or changes in the amount of blood flowing through your body.

What are the symptoms of syncope?

Symptoms of syncope may include one or more of the following:

- Light-headedness
- "Blacking out"
- Falling for no reason
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness or grogginess
- Feeling unsteady or weak when standing
- Irregular heart beats that feel like "fluttering" in the chest, followed by lightheadedness

Are there specific medical conditions associated with syncope?

Syncope is often the result of underlying medical conditions related to your heart, nervous system or blood flow to the brain. Specific conditions may include:

- Heart arrhythmias – irregular heart beats
- Orthostatic hypotension - sudden drop in blood pressure when quickly changing position from lying or sitting to standing. This is a common side effect of many heart and blood pressure medications.

- TIA's (Transient Ischemic Attacks) –lack of blood flow to the brain caused by temporary blockage of a blood vessel in the brain from either a clot or spasm.
- Dehydration – loss of abnormally large amounts of body fluids and salts, usually from fever, vomiting, diarrhea, excessive sweating.

Other additional causes of syncope may be due to conditions such as:

- Hyperventilation – very deep or rapid breathing, often accompanying episodes of anxiety or stress
- Inner ear disorders
- Head injury

Syncope can be resolved in most patients once the underlying cause is determined and treated.

How is the underlying cause of syncope diagnosed?

Your physician will complete a thorough health history and medical exam to determine possible causes of your syncope. Certain diagnostic tests may also be ordered based on your health history, physical exam, and symptoms. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Blood tests
- Diagnostic tests such as CT scan or MRI to help your physician to detect any changes in your body systems.
- Carotid ultrasound, which measures the blood flow in the carotid arteries (the main arteries that supply blood to your head).
- Electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG), which records the electrical activity of the heart.

- Echocardiogram, which uses ultrasound to evaluate changes in the heart's size, shape, and movement.
- Tilt-table test, which monitors your blood pressure and heart rate while changing positions on a tilting table from a flat to standing position.
- Telemetry monitoring, which is continuous heart monitoring during your stay in the hospital to allow your physician and nurses to closely watch your heart rhythm and rate.

How is syncope treated?

When the underlying cause of the syncope is known, treatment is aimed at treating the underlying condition.

- Your physician may order new medications based on the underlying condition.
- Your physician may also make changes to any current medications you are taking if the underlying cause is attributed to medication side effects.
- Blood thinners may be ordered if the underlying cause is attributed to TIA's, or blood clots in the blood vessels of the brain.
- You may be instructed to take precautions to change positions slowly from lying or sitting to standing if the underlying cause is attributed to hypotension, or drop in blood pressure.
- It may be suggested that you wear support garments or compression stockings to improve circulation.
- You may be "hydrated" or given extra fluids through an intravenous catheter if it is determined that you are dehydrated.
- In certain medical conditions involving the heart, your physician may determine

that a pacemaker is needed to regulate heart rate.

- Another device to monitor and correct abnormal heart rhythms, called an implantable cardiac defibrillator, may be suggested.

Your health care team will develop a treatment plan, along with your input, that is right for you. Your physician will discuss with you different treatment options based on your underlying causes.

For more information regarding syncope, speak with your physician or nurse.

Sources:

Cleveland Clinic @ www.clevelandclinic.org

Danbury Hospital Health Information/Healthwise @ www.danburyhospital.org

National Library of Medicine/MedlinePlus @ www.nlm.nih.gov

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