Simple faint
also known as syncope or vasovagal episode

What is a faint?
Fainting happens when the brain does not receive enough oxygen. This is usually because of a reduction in blood pressure, meaning not enough blood containing oxygen is getting to the brain. This causes a person to lose consciousness for a short period of time. It is usually fairly rapid in onset but the person recovers quickly. Some people call this loss of consciousness “blacking out” as people often say their vision goes black.

People who faint will often collapse to the ground.

After a faint people will usually recover quickly although they may feel tired.

What causes fainting?
There are nerves in the body which control blood pressure and heart rate. Sometimes in response to certain triggers these nerves cause an unhelpful response lowering the blood pressure and heart rate. The result is that not enough oxygenated blood gets to the brain.

These nerves are called “autonomic” because they act automatically and we cannot control them.

Classic triggers are taking a blood sample, prolonged standing, emotional experiences, warm environments, and insufficient fluid or food intake.

Fainting can run in some families.

Fainting is very common. About 4 in 10 people will faint at some point in their life.

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms will vary but people will generally describe it as feeling sick, sweaty, lightheaded or dizzy. Some people experience changes in their vision and/or hearing.

Witnesses may describe the person as being very pale.
Sometimes there is very little time between symptoms starting and the person fainting. A few people get no symptoms at all.

**How is it diagnosed?**

The diagnosis is largely based on the history and examination findings as well as a few basic investigations.

You should have had your blood pressure taken lying down and standing up, and an ECG or heart trace is usually performed.

You may also have had a blood sugar test.

**How is it treated/ prevented?**

If you feel the symptoms coming on:

- Sit down immediately.
- Lie down with your legs up e.g. against a wall.
- Squat down if you cannot sit/lie.
- Clench and relax your calf muscles (the lower part of the leg between knee and ankle). This will help the blood circulation.

It is important to let those around you know what to do if you feel faint or do actually faint.

It is also important that they do not sit you up until you are ready.

Get up cautiously and if symptoms persist lie down again.

**Prevention**

- Avoid prolonged standing e.g. on a bus, in a queue.
- Keep cool.
- Clench and unclench your calf muscles.
- Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids especially during the first half of the day.
- Eat regular meals.
- Regular exercise – after discussion with your doctor.
- Avoid known triggers.

**What is the prognosis or expected outcome of treatment?**

The prognosis for simple faints is very good especially in young people. Older people are more at risk from harm when they fall and because there may be other causes for the faint e.g. related to the heart or nervous system.
Your doctor may refer you to a specialist for further investigation if they are concerned that your blackouts are not simple faints.

**Are there any possible complications?**

Sometimes people will injure themselves when they fall to the ground. These injuries may need medical attention.

Some “blackouts” are not caused by faints as discussed in this leaflet. If you have experienced any of the following, you need urgent medical attention:

- Blackout whilst exercising or lying down.
- Family history of sudden or unexplained deaths.
- If you are over 40 years old when the blackouts start.
- If you have chest pain or palpitation where you can feel your heart beat.
- If you do not recover rapidly.

**Follow up**

It is advisable to have a follow up appointment with your GP within one to two weeks of admission/attendance at the Emergency department.

**Driving**

Ask your doctor for advice about driving. Most people who have had a typical faint whilst standing do not need to inform the DVLA. If there is any doubt, contact the DVLA.

Drivers' Medical Enquiries  
DVLA  
Swansea  
SA99 1TU  

0300 790 6806

**Further information**

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/Fainting](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Fainting)  
[Fainting (collapse)](http://www.patient.info) by patient.info

**References**

http://m.patient.media/pdf/28424.pdf?v=636220857915771225  
Reflex syncope document (STARS.org.uk)  
NICE transient loss of consciousness guidance CG 109
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‘Care Opinion’ comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.