

WHAT IS SYNCOPE?

SYNCOPE (pronounced sin-co-pee) is the medical term for a faint. It is derived from the Greek word "synkoptein", meaning, "to cut short". Syncope is the result of the temporary cutting off of the supply of oxygenated blood to the brain resulting in loss of consciousness and collapse. This is usually due to a drop in blood pressure or a change in the heart rhythm causing a drop in the amount of blood the heart pumps (the cardiac output), or a drop in the amount of oxygen being carried in the blood. If the blood supply tapers off slowly, as when the blood pressure falls, several warning symptoms develop such as light-headedness, fading of vision and buzzing in the ears before the loss of consciousness and posture. If blood flow ceases more abruptly, as when the heart stops pumping completely, then any warning lasts only a few seconds before loss of consciousness; more dramatic features appear including stiffening spasms and jerks. Many doctors call this type of fainting fit an anoxic seizure, which has nothing to do with the epileptic fits or epileptic seizures of epilepsy.

The common terms used to describe syncope are 'faint', 'blackout' or 'drop attack'. Many people, and indeed many doctors, do not realise that in many syncopal attacks the person does not always just flop or swoon, but may stiffen and jerk to some extent. Recurrent syncope is perhaps one of the most challenging and, at the same time, most frustrating problems that is encountered in clinical practice.

CAUSE OF SYNCOPE

There are many causes, some common and some rare, but the most common involve the action of the nervous system (brain, spinal cord and nerves) on the cardiovascular system (heart and blood vessels). The part of the nervous system most involved is the autonomic nervous system, so called

because it works on its own, as it were, without voluntary control. The autonomic nervous system is important in the normal regulation of breathing, heart rate and blood pressure, so it is not surprising that it is involved in disturbances of these functions.

Some typical causes can be due to the drop in blood sugar, inability to tolerate prolonged standing, headaches, heat intolerance, fatigue, chest pain and unexpected stimuli – such as pain (however slight), fright or shock.

OTHER NAMES FOR SYNCOPE

There are many terms used instead of syncope, some of these include Vasovagal Syncope, Neurocardiogenic Syncope, Neurally Mediated Syncope, Malignant Vasovagal Syncope, Emotional Fainting, Common Benign Fainting, Vasodepressor Syncope, Pallid Syncope, White Breath Holding, Reflex Asystolic Syncope and Reflex Anoxic Seizures.

It is unfortunate that there are several names for the syncopes that appear to result from derangements of the nervous control of the circulation. Part of the reason may be that understanding of the basic mechanisms is still incomplete.

It should be understood that these terms are all names for temporary upsets to the control of the blood circulation by the brain and nervous system, and are not necessarily very different from each other. A common feature is that all these syncopes tend to occur in certain situations and with certain triggers, reflecting the nervous system involvement.



IS SYNCOPE DANGEROUS?

Syncope occurs in most people at some stage and is almost never a sign of underlying life-threatening disease. However, people with frequent or severe attacks should seek a medical diagnosis for rarer conditions which might need special treatment e.g. syncope due to irregular heart rhythms or raised pressure in the head.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP THOSE LIVING WITH SYNCOPE?

In some syncopes medical intervention is appropriate. STARS is here to offer help, provide information and give reassurance. Meetings and Conferences provide the opportunity for shared experiences and mutual support.

WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF STARS

- To act as an information and support group
- To bring about public and professional awareness
- To gather more information and to aid research

WHAT DOES STARS OFFER?

- Information and reports on the various types of Syncope
- Videos showing natural attacks, ocular compression and media coverage
- Linking with similarly affected individuals and families
- Information leaflets and literature
- Newsletters, regional, national & international meetings
- Freephone 24 hour helpline