

02/08/10

‘I thought giving up salt was good for me – then I had a seizure’

Fainting fits: Emma Campbell's low blood pressure caused black outs

CAMPBELL and her mother were shopping for stationery in Manchester's Arndale centre when, without warning, the 25-year-old collapsed, pulling a full shelf of pens on to herself as she fell.

It was only when she started to regain consciousness about 30 seconds later that Emma became aware she was having a fit. She describes it as like an 'out of body' experience.

'You can see everyone looking down at you but can't stop your body convulsing - and the look of fear and panic on their faces only makes you feel more anxious,' she says.

Within minutes, paramedics were at the scene. After checking her blood pressure and monitoring her for 40 minutes, they said her condition had stabilised so she could go home.

Over the previous few months Emma had been feeling increasingly nauseous and dizzy - her GP simply advised her to boost her fluid intake and monitor the situation.

But soon after the first seizure she had another while on a work trip to London. She says at this point she was 'really scared,' so she went back to her GP, who warned she might have epilepsy and referred her to a neurologist.

'a school friend has epilepsy and I knew how terribly life-affecting it can be; it felt like a death sentence,' she says.

Tests showed no unusual brain activity. But Emma still felt unwell and was by now suffering from black outs every few weeks.

She was desperate to find out what was wrong. 'I'd been given a three-month sabbatical from the hotel company where I worked to travel to the U.S. to help underprivileged children. I needed the medical all-clear for my insurance.

'But my undiagnosed condition meant I couldn't travel and couldn't drive, one of the requirements for the placement.

'I'd sold my house to pay for the trip and was living with my parents, so really didn't want to let this opportunity slip away.'

Luckily, Emma had private health insurance through her job, which meant she was fast-tracked for further tests. After an electrocardiogram (ECG) to test for heart arrhythmia - a heart condition commonly linked to fainting and comprehensive blood tests, Emma was told the real problem was low blood pressure, linked to low sodium chloride, or salt levels.

'I was told the platelets in my blood, whose job is to carry oxygen and other nutrients around the body, were defective, which meant I couldn't balance the concentration of fluids easily in my body. I was told if my salt levels fell low enough, I could end up in a coma,' she says.

While many of us are being told to cut back on salt because it raises the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke, there are thousands of people who have blood pressure that's too low. Often, particularly with women, this is

Working together with individuals, families and medical professionals to offer support and information on Syncope and Reflex Anoxic Seizures

because they aren't getting enough salt in their diet.

Many end up misdiagnosed, as Emma's cardiologist Dr Adam Fitzpatrick explains: 'a large number of people are wrongly diagnosed as epileptic.

'There are other underlying causes and, in women in particular, salt deficiency is a common cause, resulting in very similar symptoms.'

When your salt levels are low, the body tries to compensate by reducing the amount of fluid.

The problem is that less fluid means it's harder to maintain your blood pressure, especially when standing, on hot days, after exercise, or after a frightening experience - this reduces blood flow to the brain and central nervous system, causing fainting as well as twitching and jerking. Dr Fitzpatrick, who is based at The **Manchester Royal Infirmary** (MRI) is a hospital in Manchester and is an expert on fits and fainting.

'Up to 30 per cent of adults and 40 per cent of children with a diagnosis of epilepsy do not have it, and many of these have convulsive syncope which in many cases, such as Emma's, can be caused by a salt deficiency,' he says.

'Far too many people are misdiagnosed - at least 74,000 in the UK according to latest who don't their prescriptions, a survey figures from the parliamentary epilepsy Group, and that's almost certainly a big underestimate.

'Doctors often fail to consider convulsive syncope, where the problem is caused by a lack of blood to the brain, not by epilepsy.'

Over the past two years, of the 327 patients with epilepsy-type symptoms sent to the Rapid access black outs Triage NHS Clinic in Manchester where Dr Fitzgerald works, just 20 needed to be referred on to see a neurologist to test for epilepsy.

'I get sent a lot of patients who actually have low blood pressure, a common feature in these circumstances, and the question I ask, particularly with women, is how much salt they get in their diet,' he says.

'Very often, they say they don't like the taste and they know it's bad for them, so they try to minimise their intake.

'But without sufficient salt in their system they can't retain fluids, so their blood pressure drops, resulting in black outs.'

While there is no clinically proven explanation for why women are often affected by convulsive syncope, he suggests it's because they're more likely to pick up on public health messages.

'Ask a man what medication he's on, and usually he'll turn to his partner and ask her.

'Women tend to be more health conscious, which can be counterproductive in these situations.'

His concern is that an incorrect diagnosis of epilepsy means many patients can end up on medication they don't need, with potentially worrying side-effects, including birth defects.

One study found that children of mothers who'd taken the antiepilepsy drug sodium valproate during pregnancy had lower IQ and were more likely to have anatomical abnormalities.

One of the major problems is lack of black out clinics such as the one Dr Fitzpatrick runs. 'The EEG brain scans are

www.stars.org.uk info@stars.org.uk www.education.stars.org.uk

Patrons: Prof John Stephenson, Prof Christopher Mathais, Prof Rose Anne Kenny, Dr William Whitehouse, Dr Adam Fitzpatrick,

Sir Elton John CBE, Twiggy Lawson, Sir Roger Moore KBE, John Burton Race.

Trustees: Mrs Susan Broatch, Mr Andrew Fear, Prof Rose Anne Kenny, Mrs Cathrine Reid, Dr William Whitehouse.

Founder & Chief Executive: Mrs Trudie Lobban MBE



PO BOX 175
Stratford-Upon-Avon
Warwickshire
CV37 8YD

Syncope Trust And Reflex anoxic Seizures

T: +44 (0) 1789 450564
F: +44 (0) 1789 450682

www.stars.org.uk

Working together with individuals, families and medical professionals to offer support and information on Syncope and Reflex Anoxic Seizures

usually unhelpful in terms of pinpointing any problems, which is why we've come up with a set of measures for high risk.

'While fainting can be the result of low blood pressure, it can also be a sign of heart rhythm problems, so we check on various factors including whether patients have an abnormal electrocardiogram - a test to measure the heart's electrical activity.'

We need to put right the message that salt is an absolute killer for all people - the recommended daily limit of 6 grams doesn't mean that none is best,' he says.

'With inadequate salt, your kidneys can't function properly and there can be an overall malfunction of body fluids and blood pressure. Of course, you need to watch your intake, but that definitely doesn't mean cutting it out altogether.

'If you're concerned, or suffer black outs, it's something you want to bring up your GP. A history of low blood pressure is an important clue, especially when combined with dizziness and black outs.'

On Dr Fitzpatrick's advice, Emma, now 29, started adding a pinch of extra salt to all her meals and also drinks plenty of fluid.

'When you're brought up not to eat salt, with years of public health adverts and teachers explaining how it can contribute to high blood pressure and heart disease, it's tough adding it to everything,' she says.

Although she didn't make her trip to the U.S., slowly - and after several further follow-up blood tests with her GP - her salt levels were restored and the black outs 'became a thing of the past'.

'I still have to monitor the situation, but I now have my life back again, and I haven't been diagnosed an epileptic or been forced to take any unnecessary drugs, which is a fantastic result.

'Of course, I wish none of this had happened - but have a lot to be thankful for.'

For more details about the convulsive syncope and NHS black out clinics, which accept referrals from GPs, call 01789 450564 or visit stars.org.uk/patient-info/diagnosis/black-outs-checklist

Author: MATTHEW BARBOUR

www.stars.org.uk info@stars.org.uk www.education.stars.org.uk

Patrons: Prof John Stephenson, Prof Christopher Mathais, Prof Rose Anne Kenny, Dr William Whitehouse, Dr Adam Fitzpatrick,

Sir Elton John CBE, Twiggy Lawson, Sir Roger Moore KBE, John Burton Race.

Trustees: Mrs Susan Broatch, Mr Andrew Fear, Prof Rose Anne Kenny, Mrs Cathrine Reid, Dr William Whitehouse.

Founder & Chief Executive: Mrs Trudie Lobban MBE

Registered Charity Number – 1084898