

Pressure

After years of dizzy spells, fainting fits and not being taken seriously by doctors, one mum discovered the surprising cause of all her problems, as Rachel Carlyle reports

Situation



Mother of three Alexandra Whitman considers herself a pretty healthy person, yet she would think nothing of eating several packets of crisps in one go or pouring salt on her food.

That's because Alexandra has low blood pressure (BP), which can cause lethargy and dizziness – if it falls too far she'll start blacking out.

Eating plenty of salt is one way to manage her condition. "I ignore the advice on salt intakes so when I have a craving for salt and vinegar crisps I'll eat them," says Alexandra, 51, from Salisbury, Wiltshire.

"I eat ridiculously high levels of salt but I've never had a high blood pressure reading, not even when I was pregnant.

"People often say, lucky you, because we're more used to the dangers of high blood pressure. But they don't understand how sluggish having low blood pressure

can make you feel, especially as a working mother."

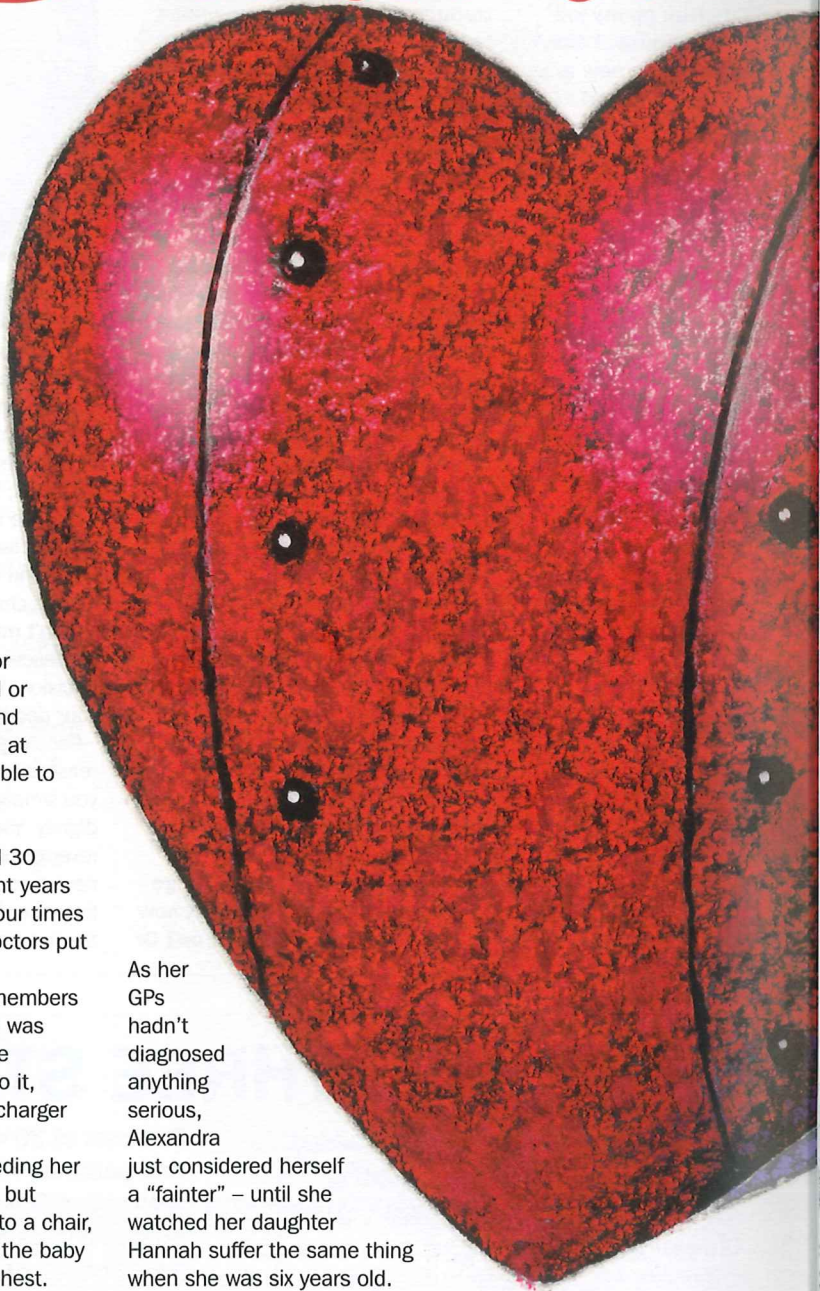
Blood pressure varies widely between individuals but in general a 90/60 reading is considered on the low side, while 120/80 is normal and a sustained 140/90 is high. Alexandra's reading is on the lower side of normal but her blood pressure control system is so over-sensitive that her pressure can suddenly drop – particularly if she has a sudden shock or minor injury, and is stressed or dehydrated. She will faint and her BP can drop to 105/55, at which point she isn't even able to get out of bed without help.

Alexandra has had regular blackouts, of usually around 30 seconds, since she was eight years old. She would faint up to four times a term at school, but her doctors put it down to growth spurts.

The worst incident she remembers was 12 years ago when she was packing a weekend bag. She suddenly fainted and fell into it, landing on a mobile phone charger and dislocating her jaw.

Once she fainted while feeding her youngest daughter Hannah, but luckily she fell backwards into a chair, and when she came round, the baby was lying uninjured on her chest.

As her GPs hadn't diagnosed anything serious, Alexandra just considered herself a "fainter" – until she watched her daughter Hannah suffer the same thing when she was six years old.



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"One day,
coming into the
kitchen, she banged her
elbow on the door-frame and
just crashed to the ground. I realised
I was watching what happened to me
for so many years. She was so pale
with a blueish tinge around her lips
and she wasn't breathing. I thought
I'd just watched my daughter die. It

GETTY

was
truly awful."

At A&E the truth
finally dawned. "The registrar
asked if anyone else in the family
had suffered similar symptoms.
I said yes and he told me that it
was a genetic condition called
'reflex anoxic seizures'. At home
I did a Google search and found the
website of a charity called Stars,
which had so many stories similar
to mine that I couldn't take my
eyes off it. I remain indebted to
that doctor because he opened
a whole new world to me.

"Before, I'd been made to feel like
a hypochondriac. One doctor I saw
told me I was 'like a Victorian lady
prone to swooning'. It was all I could
do not to punch him."

Consultant cardiologist Nicholas Gall
at King's College, London, says he
hears experiences like Alexandra's all
too often. "The people I see have
often been labelled mad or hysterical
for years and I'm the first person
they've spoken to who recognises
their symptoms," he says.

These types of faints are caused
by a fault in the autonomic nervous
system, when the nerves that steady
blood pressure suddenly withdraw
their input. Pressure falls and the
blood supply to the brain is reduced,
which causes dizziness and blackouts.
Some people can have several attacks
every week and girls and women are
particularly prone: "No one knows
why, but oestrogen must have
something to do with it," says Dr Gall.

Doctors are currently seeing a rise
in cases of low BP and blackouts.
"There's a school of thought that says
because everything is salt-free or low
salt these days, quite a lot of the
population are salt deficient, which
might explain why we're seeing more
cases of fainting," says Dr Gall.

Low pressure tends to run in families
and is only problematic if it causes
symptoms such as fainting. GP and
author Dr Rob Hicks says: "Some
people just naturally have low blood
pressure – there's no explanation."

Many of his patients are those
who've been over treated for high
blood pressure. You might have had
a stressful job and smoked (two
leading causes of high BP) so were
put on medication. But if you retire
and give up smoking, yet stay on that
same dose, your blood pressure may
fall too far, leading to lethargy, fatigue
and dizziness.


Low BP might also be due to
extreme dehydration (from sitting in
the sun all day without a drink, for
example) or anaemia. And low BP
in the over fifties can be
caused by carotid sinus
syndrome, where the
artery in the neck that
controls blood pressure
becomes over-sensitive,
particularly when
compressed by a tight
collar or by certain
neck movements. Dr
Hicks says: "As a GP, if

I've ruled out everything – dehydration
or a problem with medication – and
they've only got low blood pressure,
the next question is what do you do?"

Lifestyle changes can make a
difference in 70 per cent of cases.
Dr Gall recommends that his
patients drink more water and eat
more salt. There are also basic
exercises to do as soon as you feel
a faint coming on. You can cross
and uncross your legs, or flex your
calves to pump more blood around
the body. Many people swear by
moving up and down on the balls of
their feet to prevent blood pooling
there, which can significantly raise
blood pressure. Regular aerobic
exercise can also help by increasing
blood volume and the efficiency of
the calf muscles.

"A lot of the treatment is gaining
understanding of the condition,"
says Dr Gall. "Most of the time
that is enough to enable people
to cope better."

Alexandra Whitman certainly hasn't
let low BP hold her back: she's run
her own business, been a university
lecturer, had three daughters and is
now retraining as a learning support
assistant for dyslexic children.

"I've lived my life ignoring it as
much as possible, although it has
been a struggle," she says. "Waking
up not knowing if your body is going
to hold out today is an odd feeling.
I have been dismissed as a
hypochondriac so many times that
sometimes I've even thought, well,
perhaps I am one. But at least I know
the truth now." 

Visit Stars (go to Syncope Trust and
Reflex Anoxic Seizures) at www.stars.org.uk. For information about blood
pressure, see www.bpassoc.org.uk.

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