

SYNCOPE [you say it like sink-oh-pee]

What is syncope?

'Syncope' is a difficult word that doctors use to explain the type of blackouts that are caused by a problem with the heart or the blood pressure. This can stop the blood that is carrying oxygen from getting to the brain.



Why and how does syncope happen?

In our body we have a very important nerve called the vagus nerve, which controls how our body works in lots of different ways. It helps to move food around the body, controls the muscles we need to make sounds, helps to make us sweat and keeps our heart beating!

If someone has syncope, many different things- which we call 'triggers'- such as very hot or cold temperatures, a sudden shock or surprise, a bump, being very thirsty, or standing up for a long time, can upset this nerve. This is because it has been hurt or surprised by the trigger.

It 'curls up' and stops the heart from beating or makes it beat very slowly for a few seconds and the pressure that pumps the blood around very low. There is a sudden drop in the amount of blood getting to the brain with oxygen, and the person blacks out- they fall over and become unconscious. Sometimes the person will know that they are about to blackout and might lie down to try to stop it.

TRIGGER → VAGUS NERVE 'CURLS UP' → STOPS HEART BEATING/DROP IN AMOUNT OF PRESSURE PUMPING THE BLOOD → BLOOD NOT BEING PUMPED TO BRAIN → SYNCOPE OCCURS

For some people, if their heart stops very suddenly, their arms and legs jerk and their face goes very pale. These jerks are just the way that their body kicks back to work after they have been unconscious. (It is a bit like a car trying to start on a frosty morning!)

The brain always kicks in and makes sure that the heart starts beating again and that everything goes back to normal, so the person will always be OK. They might not remember what has happened though and might be very sleepy and in a bad mood for a few days!