

The fainting disease



Look out below!
For some people,
a rush of
emotion can
trigger fainting.

Life is packed
with drama when
you're prone
to passing out.

By Abigail Green

I've always looked forward to having a baby. But now that I'm married, in my 30s, and seriously considering motherhood, I'm terrified. My biggest fear? It's not labor, delivery, breast-feeding, or losing my mind to sleep deprivation. What frightens me most is that every time I go to the doctor's office, I faint.

During my annual OB-GYN visit recently, I felt a familiar hotheaded sensation. My ears began to buzz, and drops of perspiration beaded along my hairline. "Your face is as white as a ghost," the nurse remarked. She

brought me a cup of water and urged me to lie down for a few minutes. When the feeling passed, she helped me up, then let go of my elbow. Suddenly, the lights dimmed, and I found myself on the floor with a lump on my head.

If I faint anytime I go near a doctor—it's happened at least a dozen times since I was 12—how will the baby and I ever survive pregnancy? And if we're lucky enough to make it through those 9 months, what kind of mother will I be if I collapse every time we visit the pediatrician?

Thankfully, most women do not have my problem. But I must admit I take solace in knowing that it's not completely uncommon. Roughly one-fifth of the population suffers from neurally mediated reflex syncope, also known as vasovagal syncope or common fainting. And in surveys, up to 50 percent of young adults report having lost consciousness at some point, for no obvious reason.

Everyone has the same wiring, neurologically speaking, so we're all vulnerable to the occasional short-circuit—if, for instance, we overdo it at the gym or suffer a coughing fit. But susceptibility varies, says the University of Minnesota's David G. Benditt, MD, a cardiologist and lead author of a recent study on neurally mediated reflex syncope. "One person may never faint, another may faint once or twice in a lifetime, and others may faint many times," he says.

Fainting usually leads doctors to check for something serious—and usually they don't find anything. "It's not a disease like, say, seizure disorders or epilepsy. But it can be a symptom, like sweating or headaches, of an underlying disorder," says Carol

The fainting disease continued

Chen-Scarabelli, CCRN, MsN, a cardiovascular nurse practitioner and co-author of a recent syncope review in the *British Medical Journal*. People with heart conditions are known to be at risk for fainting because of potentially dangerous heart rhythm abnormalities, but usually the trigger is hard to pin down.

My "situational syncope," as the experts call it, is brought on by fear or panic. Who knows why? A few people have suggested there must be a traumatic medical incident in my past. (I can think of none—except for the fainting.) One nurse said she thought I must be pregnant. (I wasn't.) My mother jokes that I lose consciousness around doctors because of a highly developed survival instinct, sort of like a possum playing dead. (Thanks, Mom.)

So fainting is not likely to end my life, except in the unlikely event that I pass out behind the wheel or fall and

bleed to death. Happily, Benditt says, "A lightning strike is more likely." These odds, however, won't help me (or a baby-to-be) get through 9 months of pregnancy bruise-free, especially since the first step in managing the disorder is to avoid the trigger.

I tried the total-immersion method: I signed up to give blood. Big mistake. I couldn't even get through the paperwork before I began to feel faint. Next, I tried acupuncture. The sight of the narrow needles didn't bring on a fainting spell; nor, surprisingly, did their application. But after six visits, I still got woozy just thinking about my recent wisdom-tooth surgery. Perhaps my situational syncope is induced only by Western medicine.

The experts recommend I try simpler remedies. So the next time I have a doctor's appointment, I'll be sure I'm well hydrated; Benditt suggests Gatorade or other electrolyte-

containing beverages. And I'll request that blood be drawn while I am lying down. If I still get light-headed, isometric exercises like crossing my legs and squeezing should help by raising my blood pressure; a quick blood-pressure dip usually precedes a fainting episode.

And if none of that works, I'll just have to look on the bright side. Recently, I visited a friend in the delivery room the day she was induced. My face retained its normal color at the sight of her hooked up to IVs and monitors. I barely flinched at such faint-inducing terms as epidural and episiotomy. And at the end of it all, my exhausted friend cradled her newborn daughter and assured me, "It's worth it." So maybe motherhood is in my future after all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go lie down. ❧

Writer Abigail Green lives in Baltimore, Maryland.



Did you scrape today?
OK, it sounds a little weird. But the results should keep you smiling.

The surprising secret to fresh breath

You brush, you rinse, you floss—and then do it all over again—but sometimes you just can't keep your breath fresh. So here's help: New research says using a tongue scraper, an inexpensive gadget available at drugstores, can make your mouth a friendlier place.

Researchers at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, recently found that tongue scraping was 30 percent better than tongue brushing at reducing the sulfur compounds that are known to cause smelly breath. Bacteria that thrive in the mucus on the back of your tongue produce these chemicals, and the area's difficult to reach with a toothbrush. "For these bacteria, it's Club Med back there," explains Richard Price, DMD, a spokesperson for the American Dental Association. "If you're not getting your brush into gag city, you're not far enough."

Other studies suggest that scraping, a practice performed in Asian countries for thousands of years, may help reduce tooth decay and sharpen your sense of taste.

Scrapers cost anywhere from \$3 to \$10. Choose a flexible, U-shaped one—it's easiest to maneuver—and be gentle so you don't hurt your tongue. —Elizabeth Uhlin