

Fainting and low pain tolerance ^[1]

Dear Alice,

If I get hurt really sharply or suddenly, I end up passing out. This has happened once when I slammed my finger in a doorway, once when I bashed my elbow on the shower wall, once when my finger was held in an awkward, painful position, and once when I got a flu shot. Why do I pass out like this, and why do I have such low pain tolerance?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Ouch! Looks like you've acquired quite a few bumps and bruises! It's actually not unusual to faint after experiencing physical pain. A fainting spell is most commonly due to a temporary interruption in the functioning of your body's autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system regulates your heart rate and blood pressure. When you experience sudden pain, your heart rate and blood pressure can rapidly decrease, which affects the amount of blood flowing to your brain. This stress on the body, primarily the sudden loss of blood, can result in fainting.

A few fainting spells over a lifetime is fairly common among healthy people, but there are certain instances when fainting can be indicative of a more serious condition. For example, if your fainting episodes happened over a short period of time, or if you begin to experience fainting spells more often, you should seek medical attention.

Fainting is not necessarily an abnormal reaction to the type of pain you've described. In fact, fainting episodes make up six percent of hospital visits! That is quite a high number when you think about the myriad of illnesses and injuries people suffer from.

While each of us has a different level of pain tolerance, there has been no conclusive scientific evidence to suggest that fainting is related to an individual's pain threshold. The jury is still out on why pain tolerance varies from person to person. However, some studies suggest that there might be an underlying genetic component that enables some people to withstand more pain than others.

Just remember to keep tabs on how often you experience fainting in order to avoid anything more serious. And please, dear reader, be careful out there!

Alice!

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