

Exertional Syncope & Palpitations

Quick-reference for community pharmacists

■ IS THIS AN EMERGENCY? Call 999 immediately if ANY apply

- Ongoing or persistent chest pain
- Breathlessness at rest or not improving
- Persistent palpitations that have not settled
- Recurrent collapse or loss of consciousness
- Reduced level of consciousness or confusion

■ RED FLAGS: Arrange urgent same-day medical assessment

- Syncope (true blackout, not just dizziness) **during** exercise
- Syncope in the **immediate recovery period** after exercise
- Palpitations with associated dizziness, presyncope, or collapse
- Palpitations with chest pain or breathlessness
- Recurrent unexplained palpitations, especially if sudden onset or irregular-feeling
- Family history of sudden unexplained death under 40, inherited cardiac condition, or known structural heart disease

If any red flag applies: advise the patient not to return to strenuous exercise until reviewed. Arrange same-day GP review or refer to 111 if GP unavailable.

✓ MORE LIKELY BENIGN: Self-care advice may be appropriate

- No red flags present and history is clearly consistent with a simple faint
- Syncope after stopping exercise, with heat or dehydration (typical vasovagal features)
- Resolves completely and quickly with rest, cooling, or fluids
- No ongoing symptoms or associated chest pain, breathlessness, or palpitations

Safety-net: advise the patient to seek urgent review if episodes recur, occur during exercise, or are associated with chest pain, palpitations, or a family history of sudden cardiac death.

Feature	More likely benign	Red flag ■
Timing	After stopping exercise; with heat or dehydration	During exertion or immediately after
Consciousness	Dizziness or lightheadedness only; no true blackout	True transient loss of consciousness
Palpitations	Gradual awareness of fast heartbeat; settles with rest	Sudden onset, irregular, or with symptoms
Resolution	Settles completely with rest, cooling, or fluids	Ongoing chest pain, breathlessness, or collapse

Key reminders: A blackout during exercise is a red flag: do not dismiss as dehydration. Palpitations matter more when linked to collapse, chest pain, breathlessness, or family history. Clear red flags justify referral; this is appropriate escalation, not over-referral.