

# Breath-Holding Spells

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## What is a breath-holding spell?

A breath-holding spell happens when your child holds their breath after being suddenly injured, startled, upset or frightened. They happen only when awake or waking up from sleep. Breath-holding spells are not dangerous. They do not lead to epilepsy or brain damage.

Breath-holding spells usually begin when children are between 6 months and 2 years old. Children usually outgrow them by age 5 or 6.

## What happens during a breath-holding spell?

- Your child may cry out and then stop breathing at the beginning or end of a breath, until they become blue around the lips or pale in the face and lose consciousness.
- Loss of consciousness can happen up to 30 seconds after an event that might normally cause a child to cry, such as an injury or taking away something that they want. Your child may become sweaty, limp, or stiff and may have a few twitches or muscle jerks with arching back and eyes rolling back into the head.
- Most last between 2 and 20 seconds.
- Your child will breathe normally again in less than 1 minute and should recover shortly afterwards.

## How are they different than seizures?

- Breath-holding spells are immediately triggered by stressful or frustrating events or situations
- Breath-holding spells are brief
- Recovery from a breath-holding spell is relatively fast

## What causes breath-holding spells?

An abnormal pain and emotion reflex causes about 5% of normal children to involuntarily hold their breath and make their heart rate slow down. This decreases blood flow to the brain for long enough to trigger a change in brain activity that causes the child to pass out. It does not damage the brain. Most of the time the cause of this abnormal reflex is unknown, while sometimes it is caused by:

- Family history
- Iron deficiency and anemia
- Genetic condition

## How often do they happen?

Breath-holding spells can happen as often as 1 or 2 times a day. In other children, they happen only 1 or 2 times a month, or even more rarely.

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### To Learn More

- Neurology  
206-987-2078
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [seattlechildrens.org](http://seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

### How do I prevent it from happening?

Check out these resources on child behavior:

- Tantrums  
[kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/tantrums.html](https://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/tantrums.html)
- Understanding Behavior Problems  
[seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1550.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1550.pdf)
- Emotion Coaching  
[seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1548.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1548.pdf)
- Discipline  
[seattlechildrens.org/safety-wellness/behavioral-emotional-wellness/discipline/](https://seattlechildrens.org/safety-wellness/behavioral-emotional-wellness/discipline/)

Ask your child's healthcare provider about testing for iron deficiency and anemia. Iron supplements can prevent breath-holding spells by treating these problems, if they are diagnosed. Check with your healthcare provider first before giving any type of medicine to your child.

If your child has special health, developmental or mental health concerns, ask your child's healthcare provider about behavior resources that are right for you.

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### What should I do when it happens?

#### During a breath-holding spell

- Make sure your child is in a safe place where they will not fall or be hurt.
- If they become faint, put them on their side to allow normal blood flow to return to the brain. Do not hold them upright until they recover.
- If available, put a cold cloth on your child's forehead during a spell to help shorten the episode.
- Do not put anything in your child's mouth.
- Breath-holding spells that do not cause your child to become faint do not require specific treatment.

#### After the breath-holding spell

- As your child recovers, give them some space. Try to act relaxed, even if you are frightened.
- After a few minutes, offer your child a hug. Try not to give too much extra attention at that time. If you do, your child may repeat the behavior in similar situations.
- If your child had a tantrum over something that triggered the spell, do not change your decision after the spell. Be consistent with rules and limits.

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### When do I call 911?

#### Immediately call 911, if:

- Your child stops breathing or has trouble breathing for more than 1 minute
- Your child loses consciousness for more than 1 minute