

June 3, 2015

Follow AHS_Media on Twitter 

Researchers look to genetics to try to understand fainting

CALGARY — Calgary researchers are looking for people who faint to participate in a study that's trying to pinpoint possible genetic causes for this common and debilitating condition.

Between 35 to 40 per cent of Canadians experience syncope, which is the medical term for fainting. For some, it may be only one or two isolated instances but for others, fainting occurs on a regular basis.

"Of the people who faint, about half will have fainted more than three or four times and many have fainted more than 20 times," says Dr. Robert Sheldon, an Alberta Health Services cardiologist and internationally recognized expert on the subject. "It has a tremendous impact on quality of life and can be compared to chronic back pain or severe arthritis."

Aside from the serious physical injuries that can result when people suddenly lose consciousness, fainting can also take away freedoms, such as driving.

"It's not an exaggeration to say that some people have a terrible time of it at home and at work," says Dr. Sheldon, also a professor in the Cumming School of Medicine and member of the Libin Cardiovascular Institute of Alberta.

Physicians don't have adequate treatments for syncope, even though many drugs have been tested. Effective treatment remains elusive, in part, because it's not fully understood why some people experience syncope and others don't.

Previous research has indicated fainting might have genetic origins, which has led Dr. Sheldon and co-investigator Dr. Brenda Gerull to establish the Calgary study on genetic susceptibility to syncope.

Their study is comparing the genes of 1,000 people who faint with 1,000 who don't. To date, researchers have recruited 800 fainters and are looking for 200 more to complete their data collection. All that's required is a saliva sample and completion of a questionnaire.

For Angel Redisky and her family, an effective treatment can't come too soon. The 46-year-old fainted on April 10, 2013, in a delivery room at Rockyview General Hospital while her daughter was getting an epidural. Since then, she estimates she faints, on average, every 10 days.

"I have three granddaughters but I'm not allowed to be alone with them," Redisky says. "Sure, Nan can babysit, but someone else has to be there to babysit Nan."

During fainting episodes, Redisky has wound up with bruises, cuts, rug burns and once even broke a wall in a bathroom at work when she struck her head.

"It's really frustrating to hear the doctors say they don't know why this is happening," says Redisky. "I've had all the tests done and I've been in several clinical trials. For me, it's a no-brainer to get involved in this research project."

Follow AHS_Media on Twitter 

Although Redisky is able to continue to work in a clinic as a licensed practical nurse, her daughter Kara, 22, frequently accompanies her on other outings in case her mother faints.

Dr. Sheldon's research program has made Calgary one of the pre-eminent centres in the world for the study of syncope.

To find out about participating in the study on genetic susceptibility to syncope, phone research co-ordinator Cindy Eronmwon at 403-220-8897 or email coeronmw@ucalgary.ca.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

- 30 -

The University of Calgary is a leading Canadian university located in the nation's most enterprising city. The university has a clear strategic direction – "Eyes High" – to become one of Canada's top five research universities by 2016, grounded in innovative learning and teaching and fully integrated with the community of Calgary. For more information, visit ucalgary.ca.

The Libin Cardiovascular Institute of Alberta is an entity of Alberta Health Service - Calgary Zone and the University of Calgary with more than 150 research and clinician members. It co-ordinates all cardiovascular science research, education and patient care across both AHS-C and UCalgary, serving a population of two million people in southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Eastern British Columbia. It provides education and training of health care professionals, offers world-class treatment using innovative technologies and access to cardiac services through novel health care solutions. For more info, visit libinstitute.org or follow @libinstitute on Twitter.

For media inquiries, contact:

Greg Harris
AHS Communications
403-943-2911 (office)
403-619-3108 (cell)
gregory.harris@albertahealthservices.ca