

GPFIRST

Your family doctor, your first stop.

YOUR GPs CAN TREAT THESE CONDITIONS

The GPFirst Programme was launched in 2014 to encourage patients in eastern Singapore to see their general practitioners (GPs) for mild to moderate medical conditions, rather than head to the emergency department first. In this regular series, our eastern community GPs offer advice on common ailments *CARING* readers might face.

In this issue, we would like to share with you about anaemia and dandruff. Do visit www.gpfirst.sg or see your GP for more information on other common conditions such as cuts, bruises, mild scalds, nausea, headaches, sprains and fevers.

IS THIS ANAEMIA?

I am a 22-year-old female with no significant past medical or surgical history. For the past few months, I have been feeling lethargic. I am constantly tired, even when I am not doing anything much. I also experience shortness of breath without much exertion. On a few occasions, as I was standing up, I felt as if I was going to faint. Because I am afraid of fainting, I have minimised my outings and stay home most of the time. What could be wrong with me? Could this be related to my vegetarian diet? Or could this be due to something more serious?

Tiredness can be prevalent in Singapore. There are many causes, including low blood count, depression, lifestyle factors, sleep disorder and underlying medical illnesses.



Fainting spells, however, belong to a different category. Vasovagal syncope, which occurs when not enough blood gets to the brain in time, can lead to fainting. This is actually normal for some, especially after their blood is drawn or they have stood for too long. But for others, it can mean anaemia or, rarely, heart-rhythm problems.

If the above symptoms are due to low blood count, you may have to examine your diet. Your body requires iron, vitamin B12 and folate to make blood cells. If you are on a restrictive diet such as a vegetarian one, you may need some supplements to make up for these important vitamins. You can



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also try to eat more green leafy vegetables, iron-fortified cereals, breads and peas. A thorough review of your diet with a dietician may be helpful as well.

If you have fainting spells where you almost or actually black out, you should see a GP as soon as possible. Otherwise, it would be more prudent to seek a non-urgent consultation with your GP.

Lastly, your fear of fainting appears to be affecting you a great deal. I can imagine how difficult it is for you to get out of the house when you are feeling weak. It will be useful to talk to a doctor or a psychologist about this fear. ☺

DEALING WITH DANDRUFF

I am an 18-year-old male currently preparing for my A Levels. With my hectic schedule, I often reach home late and go straight to bed without showering or washing my hair. Dandruff seems to have developed on my scalp, with flakes falling and landing on my clothes. As I run my hand through my hair, I can't help but try to peel off the hard, dry skin on my scalp. Just last week, some parts of my scalp bled after I scratched a persistent itch. There are also unsightly patches of dry skin behind my ears. I have been using an anti-dandruff shampoo daily, but the condition has not improved. The flakes have now become chunkier. I am getting really worried. Is my shampoo making it worse? Will my GP be able to help me?

Dandruff is also known as pityriasis sicca, an inflammation of the skin. It is a mild form of seborrhoeic dermatitis, which may occur after puberty or later in life. It usually affects areas with many oil glands, such as the scalp, face, upper chest and back.

In the initial stages, dandruff is often characterised by fine white scaling and redness of the scalp skin. It can also be accompanied by itching. The condition may then progress to affect the skin behind the

ears and other facial areas. This tends to appear as dry, cracked skin.

Based on what you have described, it sounds like you have dandruff. But it is important for you to visit your GP for a detailed examination, as the same symptoms can be caused by other conditions such as fungal infection of the scalp (tinea capitis), skin inflammation due to allergies (allergic dermatitis), and psoriasis, which is a chronic skin inflammation. The diagnosis of seborrhoeic dermatitis is usually based on the appearance and location of the rash. No further investigations are usually needed.

Treatments for seborrhoeic dermatitis include creams and ointments that contain steroids or antifungals (medicines that kill fungi). Your GP may also prescribe shampoos with antifungal or steroid contents. Do bring your shampoo along when consulting your GP as he or she will then be able to advise on its suitability. Over-the-counter anti-dandruff shampoos include Selsun, which contains selenium sulfide that helps to slow down the growth of fungal infection. Typically, you will use your anti-dandruff shampoo every day; when less dandruff is seen, you can use it twice a week. It should be left on your hair for five to 10 minutes before rinsing it off.

Lastly, stress is known to be a trigger for seborrhoeic dermatitis. Be sure to take time off your busy schedule for activities that can help you destress. ☺



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