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TO GIVE OR NOT TO GIVE

By:

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I pushed open the heavy glass door and the thick summer heat hit me in the face like I'd opened an oven door. My stomach turned cartwheels as I stumbled across the parking lot, fumbling in my purse for my car-keys. My ears started to ring—quietly at first—then the sound of honking geese from a nearby pond faded, and the ringing took over. A dark tunnel closed in around me. Then hot, hard concrete hit my right shoulder, and the side of my face.

My visit to the blood donor center had started out pleasantly enough. I sat in an air-conditioned waiting room until it was my turn to go into a cubicle with a nurse to answer questions (if I'd knowingly been exposed to AIDS, been to a foreign country, etc.) and have a mini physical. Usually the worst part of the donating experience for me, the finger prick wasn't as bad as I remembered. My blood iron level was perfect, my blood pressure was its usual 90/60 and my temperature was normal. I proceeded to the back room where I was instructed to sit in a reclining donor chair and roll up my sleeve. The nurse asked me which arm I preferred he take the blood from and I chose my left arm like always. The needle went in with barely a pinch. I glanced at the clock on the wall, which read 1:16 PM.

As time progressed, I became uncomfortable and began to squirm around. I felt sweat trickling down the back of my neck and a slight buzzing sensation in my head, so I asked the nurse to raise my feet. My breathing became quick and shallow. I looked at the clock again and was surprised to see it was 1:49 PM. I had been sitting there for over a half hour! The nurse had told me it should take about ten minutes. I watched countless people come in, donate blood then go when I finally told the nurse I didn't feel well. He moved the needle around in my arm to try and speed up the blood flow. A grueling 10 minutes went by before he finally filled up the blood-bag and took the needle out.

Relieved, I stood up and slowly walked to the refreshment area where I nibbled on a Fig Newton and drank a glass of cool water. I felt pretty good and decided to drive home.

I didn't quite make it to my car before passing out in the parking lot. I don't think I was unconscious for more than a minute or two, but I didn't feel right when I came to.

Disoriented, I stumbled to my car and turned on the air-conditioning. I must have sat there for at least 20 minutes before I felt good enough to drive home.

Why did I pass out after giving blood? This question plagued me for days and weeks to follow until I decided to do some research on the subject. According to a group of researchers led by Dr. David Robertson at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, approximately 150,000 people faint after giving blood each year. It was such a relief to find out I wasn't alone! Dr. Robertson's group found that in otherwise healthy individuals, drinking 16 ounces of water prior to giving blood could prevent fainting. Robert's reports that water not only helps increase blood volume, but "probably involves molecular mechanisms eliciting nervous system excitement." He recommends drinking 16 ounces of water at least 15 minutes before giving blood to significantly reduce the chances of passing out. This made sense to me. I had waited almost an hour before donating blood after I got to the center and I spent about 30 minutes driving to the center. So I had gone at least an hour and a half without any water before I donated blood. My problem was no doubt compounded by the fact that my blood pressure is on the low side and can drop even lower if I become dehydrated.

I also learned from an American Red Cross Fixed Site Volunteer that avoiding hot beverages such as coffee and tea right before donating is important. She explained that hot beverages could raise the temperature in your mouth causing a false temperature reading during the required mini physical prior to giving blood. She also said tea can affect the absorption of iron resulting in a low iron reading.

I know the caffeine contained in each of those drinks can dehydrate you as well. It's probably a good idea to wait at least a half day after drinking any caffeinated

beverage before donating blood. Drinking more water than usual will help offset the dehydrating effects of caffeinated beverages. Aim for an *extra* 8 ounces of water for each 8 ounces of caffeinated beverages you consume to help cancel out the dehydrating effects of caffeine. The Red Cross volunteer also urged that people “not come in on an empty stomach.”

As I drove home after fainting that day, I considered never donating blood again. The need for blood is steadily increasing and almost everyone could spare a pint, although most people are not donors. I will continue to be a donor, though. I don't know about you, but I want to make sure there is always enough blood available if I ever need any.

Tips for a successful blood donating experience

1. Drink 16 ounces of cool (not ice cold) water 5 to 15 minutes before giving blood.
2. Avoid hot beverages such as coffee or tea directly before donating and preferably for 4 hours prior to donating.
3. Make sure you've eaten a good meal including a healthy source of lean protein and carbohydrates within 1 1/2 hours of donating blood. (If you've eaten a meal high in fat that raises your blood lipids before donating, they won't be able to use your blood.)
4. RELAX and focus on how the small sacrifice you're making may help save a life!