

# Priority Topic: LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

## Key Features:

**BEWARE! This Priority Topic is not only about syncope. It is intentionally not labelled as syncope in order to include other conditions associated with loss of consciousness including:**

- seizure
- concussion
- intracranial hemorrhage
- syncope with WIDE differential including hemorrhage and PE

**Best single article:** [Systematic Approach to Unconscious Patient 2018](#)

1. In an unconscious patient, [assess ABC's](#) and [resuscitate](#) as needed.

***What you should study:*** see also [Priority Topic ACLS](#)

✓ [Systematic Approach to Unconscious Patient 2018 \(AMAZING review + DDx!\)](#)

2. As part of the assessment of a patient who has lost consciousness, obtain [focused history](#) from the patient or witnesses that would include [duration](#), [trauma](#), [preexisting conditions](#), [drugs](#), [toxins](#), [medications](#) and [seizure activity](#).

***What you should study:*** as part of this Key Feature, don't forget to develop a **differential diagnosis**.

✓ [EM Cases Episode 25: Pediatric Syncope and Adult Syncope](#)

✓ [Syncope Evaluation and Diagnosis AAFP 2017](#)

✓ [Seizure vs Syncope LANCET 2006](#)

3. **Examine** unconscious patients for **localizing and diagnostic signs** (e.g., ketone smell, liver flap, focal neurologic signs).

***What you should study:***

✓ [Systematic Approach to the Unconscious Patient 2018](#)

4. In patients with a loss of consciousness and a history of head trauma, **rule out intracranial bleeding**.

***What you should study:*** Couldn't find a good article on subdural and epidural hematomas... know the difference, and how to diagnose them.

✓ [Canadian CT Head Rule \(memory aid\)](#)

**If you want the original article:** [Canadian CT Head Rule LANCET 2001](#)

\*\*note the exclusion criteria (patients on anticoagulants were excluded)

✓ [EM Cases Episode 3: Pediatric Head Injury](#)

✓ [Pecarn Rule 2009](#)

5. In patients with a loss of consciousness who are anticoagulated, **rule out intracranial bleeding**.

✓ **know that you must always get a CT head for a patient on anticoagulation**

6. Assess and treat unconscious patients urgently for **reversible conditions** (e.g., shock, hypoxia, hypoglycemia, hyperglycemia, and narcotic overdose).

***What you should study:*** Review [Priority Topic ACLS](#) for your H's and T's

7. When following up patients who have lost consciousness, [assess and advise](#) regarding [return to work](#), [sporting](#), [driving](#) and [recreational activities](#) to minimize the possibility of injury to self or others in the event of a recurrence.

***What you should study:***

- ✓ [ESC Guidelines on Syncope 2018 - page 12 on driving](#)
- ✓ [Return to Play Guidelines](#)
- ✓ [Return to Learn for Children Post-Concussion CFP 2017](#)
- ✓ [Guide to Post-Concussion Care ONF 2017 page 51 for "Pathway"](#)

8. In patients who have had a loss of consciousness without a clear diagnosis, [pursue investigations](#) (e.g., rule out transient arrhythmia, seizure).

***What you should study:***

- ✓ [Systematic Approach to the Unconscious Patient 2018](#)
- ✓ [Syncope Practice Guidelines AAFP 2018](#)

9. When following up patients who have lost consciousness and where there is [potential for recurrent episodes](#), discuss specific [preventive and protective measures](#) (e.g., position changes with orthostatic pressure changes).

***What you should study:***

- ✓ [Evaluation and Management of Orthostatic Hypotension AAFP 2011 Table 8](#)
- ✓ [Therapy of Vasovagal Syncope 2010](#)

10. In patients with loss of consciousness following head trauma, treat and follow up according to current [concussion guidelines](#).

***What you should study:***

- ✓ [Concussion Guidelines \(Adult\) Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation 2013](#)
- ✓ [Concussion Guidelines \(Pediatric\) Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation 2014](#)

11. Advise authorities about appropriate patients with loss of consciousness (e.g., regarding driving status).

***What you should study:***

- ✓ CMPA: Fitness to Drive
- ✓ Ontario Department of Transport: Report a Medically Unfit Driver