Breath-holding attacks in children

What are they?
There are 2 types. Blue spells and pale spells. Most children have only one type. Blue spells are common. After a little hurt, upset or tantrum the child starts to cry. They stop breathing, turn red in the face, then blue. They may go limp and pass out. Rarely, they can have a short fit with some twitches or jerks. After a few seconds or a minute they come round and are back to normal. Sometimes they seem a bit sleepy and dazed for a short while. Pale spells are less common. They are like blue spells, but more often follow a knock or fall. After a short cry the child goes very pale, passes out, goes stiff and may arch their back. They can also have a fit and may pee. Afterwards they may sleep.

What is the cause?
We don't know. Most children don't have anything wrong with them. Children don't do it on purpose. Sometimes it runs in the family, but it isn't passed on like eye or hair colour. About 1 in 20 children have them. They never occur in sleep, or without some hurt or upset.

How often do they occur?
Most children have a few attacks, but some have a lot. Often they occur between 1 and 5 years old. Rarely up to 7 years old. Then they stop. Some children who have pale spells may have faints as they grow older.

What needs to be done for an attack?
The attacks don't cause any harm and always stop on their own. You cannot do anything to stop an attack once it has started. When your child starts to have an attack it is best to lie them down flat. Don't try to give them breaths or put anything in the mouth. You don't need to do anything afterwards. It's better not to make a fuss.

What else needs to be done?
Your child should see a doctor. This is to make sure that they are having breath-holding attacks. Often tests are not needed. There isn't any treatment. At first the attacks can seem very scary. Parents can get used to them. But when others in the family see one they can be shocked. A bad one with a fit can give you a fright. You may need to talk to your doctor again. By watching your child you may find out when they might have an attack. Then you may be able to stop a few.

Before they have an attack you could play with them, or show them something nice, or giving them a snack. Be firm, gentle and don't pamper them. Try not to let them get too excited, upset or tired. Others in the family should follow the same rules. If your child has a lot of tantrums then you may need to talk to your doctor.

You can get further information from:
King’s Mill Hospital
Patient Advice and liaison Services (PALS) on 01623 672222
Newark Hospital
Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS) on 01623 685692