

Managing Dizziness

What's Wrong?

The feeling may come without warning. Maybe you were driving and suddenly felt faint. Or maybe you turned over in a bed and the room started spinning. In most cases dizziness and faintness are not signs of serious health problems. The source of your episodes depends on your symptoms:

Vertigo- this is the feeling of spinning. It may happen if the brain receives conflicting signals from the eyes, inner ear, and body.

Dysequilibrium- this is the feeling of imbalance without a sense of spinning. It may happen if the signal path between the body and brain is disrupted.

Syncope- this is the losing of consciousness or fainting. It may happen if there's a problem with blood flow.

Common Causes

Vertigo is often caused by inner ear problems. Fainting, however, may be due to a heart or blood vessel problem. It can be hard to find the reason behind your symptoms. Your doctor will rule out serious health problems first. Symptoms such as dysequilibrium can have many causes. These include diabetes, anemia, head injury, and aging. For these reasons, your evaluation may involve working with a team of various specialists and testing.

Keeping Track

To diagnose the problem, your healthcare provider will be looking for patterns to your episodes. Patterns can show what triggers your symptoms. To track your episodes, keep a log. After an episode, write down what happened, what it felt like, and how long it lasted. After you begin treatment, write down any improvement in symptoms. Be sure to bring your log to each doctor's visit.

Working with a Team of Specialists

The ENT will perform an exam to look for clues to the cause of your dizziness. Your doctor will also go over your medical history. If the symptoms are thought to possibly be involving your ears, you will be referred to the Audiology Department for a hearing test. This is because the nerve that sends balance signals also sends hearing signals. A problem that affects balance can also affect hearing.

Starting Rehabilitation

An inner ear problem can knock out part of the balance system. But you still have your eyes, joints, and muscles working for you. To learn how to rely on specific parts of your balance system, you may be referred for vestibular rehabilitation therapy. A therapist can treat your condition, teach special exercises, and show you ways to increase safety.

Inner Ear Problems

Understand the Balance System- Balance is a group of effort of the eyes, inner ear, joints, and muscles. They each send signals to the brain about body position and head movement. Then the brain uses this information to achieve balance. When an inner ear problem exists, the brain may receive conflicting signals. This can cause vertigo.

The Inner Ear Sends Signals- Inside the inner ear are three semicircular canals. Each canal contains tiny hairs, crystals, and fluid. These structures help the canals sense up-and-down, forward, and backward, and side-to-side motion. Nerves carry the signals from the canals to the brain.

The Brain Interprets Signals- Signals from throughout the body travel to the brain. Once the signals arrive, the brain decides what they mean. Sometimes signals conflict.

Benign Positional Vertigo (BPV)- This is the most common cause of vertigo. BPV (also called BPPV) results when crystals in the canals shift into the wrong position. Episodes usually occur when the head is moved in a certain way. This can happen when turning in bed, bending, or looking up. BPV:

- Causes episodes of vertigo that last for seconds. These episodes can occur several times a day, depending on body position.
- Doesn't cause hearing loss.
- Often goes away on its own, but may go away sooner with treatment.

Infection or Inflammation- Sometimes the semicircular canals swell and send incorrect balance signals. This problem may be caused by viral infection. Depending on the cause, hearing can be affected (labyrinthitis) or can remain normal (neuronitis). Infection or inflammation:

- Causes episodes of vertigo that last for hours or days. The first episode is usually the worst.
- Can cause hearing loss.
- Often goes away on its own, but may go away sooner with treatment.

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Meniere's disease- Although uncommon, this condition happens when there is too much fluid in the canals. This causes increased pressure and swelling, and affects balance and hearing signals.

Meniere's disease:

- Causes episodes of vertigo that last for hours.
- Causes fluctuating hearing problems, usually in one ear, that worsen over time.
- Causes buzzing or ringing in ears (tinnitus).
- Causes a feeling of fullness or pressure in the ear.
- May go away on its own. However, vertigo, hearing loss, tinnitus, and ear fullness can last a lifetime.