

From the Desk of MyPhysician Associates

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Dizziness

What is dizziness?

Dizziness is a term often used to describe different symptoms. It can be the feeling that you are spinning. It also can be a milder feeling of being unsteady or woozy. Vertigo is the term used for when you feel that the room is spinning. It is important for you to explain to your health care provider what you mean by dizziness.

How does it occur?

Dizziness is not a disease. It is a symptom or a signal that the balance mechanism in your inner ear is not working properly or that there is a disturbance in your brain.

Vertigo can be triggered by holding your head in certain positions, which is called benign positional vertigo. (Benign means not tending to become worse and not life threatening.) It is the position of the head that causes vertigo, not the movement of it.

What causes dizziness?

Most often, dizziness is minor and temporary and the cause cannot be found.

Sometimes dizziness is caused by a specific infection or disease. For example, one possible cause is labyrinthitis, which is inflammation of the fluid-filled chamber of your inner ear. Meniere's disease, which affects the inner ear, can also trigger dizziness.

Dizziness also can be caused by tiredness, stress, fever, anemia, heart block, low blood sugar, and stroke.

Dizziness may be psychological in origin. It may be caused by depression, agoraphobia (the fear of open spaces), or hyperventilation (rapid, shallow breathing that may happen when you are feeling anxious).

Older people who have atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) or osteoarthritis of the joints in the neck (which may cause pressure on nerves and blood vessels) may

experience vertigo when they suddenly move their heads or look up. Dizziness occurs more often in the elderly than in other age groups and may not be caused by disease.

Rare causes of dizziness include tumors or infections in the brain, or multiple sclerosis.

What are the symptoms?

Some of the most common symptoms of dizziness are a sense that you are spinning or the room is spinning, or the feeling that you might fall.

Mild dizziness may occur when you move your head to certain positions, and it may last less than a minute.

Severe dizziness may last a few minutes, hours, or days. It can be accompanied by:

- loss of balance and falling to the ground
- loss of hearing
- blurred vision
- nausea and vomiting
- ringing in the ears
- sweating.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask you to describe your dizziness and how it occurs in as much detail as you can. He or she will want to know about any other symptoms or medical problems you are having. Your provider may deliberately try to make you feel dizzy by asking you to repeat actions or movements that cause your dizziness.

If disease is the suspected cause, your health care provider will examine your ears, eyes, and nervous system. Your provider also may order a computed tomography (CT) scan of the brain, in which x-rays are taken of your brain at several different angles. These x-rays are then combined by a computer to give a detailed view that can show evidence of some possible problems, such as tumors or strokes.

How is it treated?

The treatment will depend on the cause of your dizziness. Your health care provider will want to treat the underlying cause. For example, if you have Meniere's disease, your provider may want you on a low-salt diet. Your provider may prescribe antibiotics if he or she suspects you have an infection.

If no cause can be found for your dizziness, your health care provider may prescribe medicine for the balance mechanism in your inner ear. These drugs are usually antihistamines, such as drugs you might take for motion sickness, such as meclizine.

For mild dizziness that lasts for more than a few days, your health care provider may want you to start walking as much as possible to allow your body and other senses to compensate for the loss of balance in your inner ear.

How long will the dizziness last?

Depending on the cause, mild dizziness will usually last 1 to 2 weeks. It may also be momentary. More severe dizziness can last 4 to 6 weeks.

How can I take care of myself?

For mild dizziness, the best thing for you to do is lie down, relax, and wait for the dizziness to go away. Also try to avoid those positions or activities that cause the dizziness. Move slowly, especially when standing up.

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your health care provider if you have severe, prolonged, or repeated attacks of dizziness despite taking your medication and following other measures your provider has ordered.

In addition, if you have symptoms along with dizziness, such as loss of hearing, you should call health care provider. If these other symptoms are double vision, blindness, or numbness or weakness on one side of your face or body, call your provider immediately.