

Vertigo

Emergency Department factsheets



What is vertigo?

Vertigo is a type of dizziness. It is described as a 'spinning' sensation in the head and is usually brought on by sudden changes in position.

Some people say it feels like standing still in a spinning room. You may feel like you are going to fall over.

It is not a serious condition and usually gets better with time.

What causes vertigo?

The most common cause of vertigo is called benign positional paroxysmal vertigo or BPPV.

BPPV happens when tiny particles in the balance centre of the inner ear are disturbed, usually by sudden movement. This causes the spinning sensation.

It is a common problem that can affect people of all ages.

Activities that bring on a dizzy spell can vary. They often involve moving your head into a certain position suddenly, such as:

- looking up
- lying on one ear
- rolling over in bed
- getting out of bed
- bending over.

There are other causes of vertigo, including head injuries (such as a knock to the head), infections, inner ear disorders, and the degeneration of inner ear structures. For some people the cause may not be found.

What are the symptoms?

- Dizziness: This begins seconds after a certain head movement and lasts less than a minute.
- Feeling light-headed.
- Balance problems.
- Nausea – feeling like you are going to vomit.

These symptoms usually get better once you are in a different position.

Ringling in the ears (tinnitus) or deafness is not common. If you have these symptoms see your local doctor or health care professional.

Treatment

Vertigo often gets better by itself. Many people improve without treatment.

If BPPV is an ongoing problem then your doctor may offer options.

- Medication: Motion sickness medication can sometimes help with nausea. It will not prevent vertigo attacks. Follow the instructions on the packet.
- Special exercises: You may be advised to perform Brandt-Daroff exercises (see over the page).

You may be referred to a specialist doctor for further treatment or to rule out other rare causes for your dizziness.

Home care

Your doctor or health care professional will advise you on what to do to help with BPPV.

Here are some things you can do at home.

- Avoid head positions that provoke an attack.
- Do the Brandt-Daroff exercises, as instructed.
- Avoid sleeping on the affected or 'bad' side.
- Elevate (raise) your head on two pillows when resting.
- In the morning get up slowly and sit on the edge of the bed for a minute.
- Take prescribed medications as directed.
- Do not drive.

What to expect

- The attacks usually come in bursts. If the exercises are done regularly, the symptoms should settle over the next ten days, although it can take longer. Most people return to work or normal activities within a week.
- About one in three people will have a new attack within a year. While these attacks can cause discomfort there is usually no long-term damage.
- Some people may have ongoing problems with balance and surgery may be needed.
- Some people only ever have one attack.

Brandt-Daroff exercises

The Brandt-Daroff exercises are thought to disperse any tiny particles away from the balance centre in your ear, therefore getting rid of the cause of your dizziness.

You may be anxious that the exercises will bring back your symptoms. This is normal. However, the exercises will only work if you feel dizzy as you do them. The dizziness will get less with time.

1. Sit on the edge of the bed. Turn your head 45 degrees (look to the left). Lie down quickly on the right side. Ensure the back of the head rests on the bed. Wait 20–30 seconds or until the dizziness stops.
2. Sit upright. Wait 20–30 seconds for any dizziness to settle.

3. Repeat on the other side. Turn the head slightly to the right before lying down quickly on the left side.
4. Do five times on each side (takes about ten minutes).
5. Repeat three times a day.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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