



How Do I Know if I Have a Vestibular Disorder?

This article is adapted from information provided by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communications Disorders, (NIDCD).

By The Vestibular Disorders Association with Dr. Jeremy Hinton

Millions of people have problems with balance they describe as “dizziness.” Experts believe that more than four out of ten Americans will experience an episode of dizziness significant enough to send them to a doctor. Some, but not all, conditions that result in dizziness can be caused by problems with the inner ear and brain, also called the vestibular system.

What can be difficult for both a patient and his or her doctor is that the word “dizziness” can be used to describe different conditions, and people tend to use different terms to describe the same kind of problem. “Dizziness,” “vertigo,” and “disequilibrium” are often used interchangeably, even though they have different meanings.

DEFINITIONS

Describing your symptoms accurately can mean the difference between a successful diagnosis and one that is missed.

- *Dizziness* is a sensation of light-headedness, faintness, or unsteadiness.
- *Vertigo* is the perception of rotational movement or whirling—either of the self or surrounding objects.
- *Disequilibrium* is the loss of equilibrium. It can be experienced as feeling

off-balance or a sensation of spatial disorientation.

Almost everyone experiences a few seconds of dizziness or disequilibrium at some point — for example, when a person stands on a train platform and momentarily has an illusion of moving as a train rushes past. However, for some people, symptoms can be intense and last a long time, affecting their independence, ability to work, and quality of life.

Balance disorders can be caused by medications or certain health conditions, including problems with the organs in the inner ear or the brain. Dizziness, vertigo, and disequilibrium are all symptoms that can result from a problem with any part of the vestibular system. There are two types of vestibular disorders:

- **Peripheral** vestibular disorders, which affect parts of the inner ear, and
- **Central** vestibular disorders, which affect parts of the brain that process balance and spatial information.

ASK YOURSELF...

To help you decide whether you should seek medical help for a balance problem or dizzy spell, ask yourself the following

questions. If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, talk to your doctor.

- Do I feel unsteady?
- Do I lose my balance and fall?
- Do I feel as if I’m falling?
- Do I feel as if the room is spinning around me?
- Do I get dizzy when I lay down or turn over in bed?
- Do I feel as if I’m moving when I know I’m sitting or standing still?
- Do I feel lightheaded or as if I might faint?
- Do I have blurred vision?
- Do I ever feel disoriented, such as losing my sense of time or where I am?

HOW CAN I HELP MY DOCTOR MAKE A DIAGNOSIS?

You can help your doctor make a diagnosis and determine a treatment plan by filling in the information called for in the list below. You may want to jot down your responses to help you prepare for your appointment with your doctor.

The best way I can describe my dizziness or balance problem is:

- How often do I feel dizzy or have trouble keeping my balance?
- Have I ever fallen? If so, when, where, how often, and under what conditions?

- These are the medicines I take...

You may also want to fill out VEDA’s medical history questionnaire, found at vestibular.org/doctorvisit.

TAKE BALANCE DISORDERS SERIOUSLY

Balance disorders may lead to other problems, including fatigue, difficulty walking, problems with memory and/or focus, depression, and social isolation. If you or your child, parent, friend, or co-worker has a balance problem, take it seriously. Talk to your primary care doctor and be specific about what symptoms you have and when they occur. You may also want to ask for a referral to a vestibular specialist, which may be an ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor or a neurologist, depending on your symptoms. Vestibular testing may be conducted by an audiologist or physical therapist.

For more information on the diagnosis and treatment of balance disorders, see VEDA’s other publications at vestibular.org/educational-resources.

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5018 NE 15TH AVE · PORTLAND, OR 97211 · FAX: (503) 229-8064 · (800) 837-8428 · INFO@VESTIBULAR.ORG · VESTIBULAR.ORG

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