



Possible Symptoms of Vestibular Disorders

By The Vestibular Disorders Association, with contributions from Jeremy Hinton, DPT

The vestibular system includes the parts of the inner ear and the brain that help control balance and eye movements. If the system is damaged by disease, aging, or injury, vestibular disorders can result. Symptoms may include vertigo, dizziness, and imbalance, among others.

The type and severity of vestibular disorder symptoms can vary considerably, and be frightening and difficult to describe. People affected by vestibular disorders may be perceived as inattentive, lazy, overly anxious, or seeking attention. Functioning at work or school, performing routine daily tasks, or just getting out of bed in the morning may be difficult.

The following is a list of symptoms that have been reported by people with vestibular disorders. Not all symptoms will be experienced by every person, and other symptoms are possible.

VERTIGO AND DIZZINESS

- Spinning or whirling sensation; a feeling the person or world moving when it is not (vertigo)
- Symptoms can be present while sitting still, in specific positions, or with movement
- Lightheaded, floating, or rocking

sensation (dizziness)

- Sensation of being heavily weighted or pulled in one direction

BALANCE AND SPATIAL ORIENTATION

- Imbalance, stumbling, difficulty walking straight or when turning
- Clumsiness or difficulty with coordination
- Difficulty maintaining straight posture; head may be tilted to the side
- Tendency to look downward to confirm the location of the ground
- Tendency to touch or hold onto something when standing, or to touch or hold the head while seated
- Sensitivity to changes in walking surfaces or footwear
- Difficulty walking in the dark
- Muscle and joint pain (due to difficulty balancing)

VISION

- Trouble focusing or tracking objects with the eyes; objects or words on a page seem to jump, bounce, float, blur, or may appear doubled
- Discomfort from busy visual environments such as traffic, crowds, stores, and patterns
- Sensitivity to light, glare, and moving

- or flickering lights; fluorescent lights may be especially troublesome
- Tendency to focus on nearby objects; increased discomfort when focusing at a distance
- Increased night blindness
- Poor depth perception

HEARING

- Hearing loss; distorted, muffled, or fluctuating hearing
- Tinnitus (ringing, roaring, buzzing, whooshing, or other noises in the ear)
- Sensitivity to loud noises or environments that may increase symptoms of vertigo, dizziness, or imbalance

COGNITIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Difficulty concentrating and paying attention, easily distracted
- Forgetfulness and short-term memory lapses
- Confusion, disorientation, and difficulty comprehending directions or instructions
- Difficulty understanding conversations, especially when there is background noise or movement
- Mental and/or physical fatigue out of proportion to activity

- Anxiety, panic
- Loss of self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-esteem
- Depression

(Note: these are not necessarily a direct effect of a vestibular problem, but commonly found along with vestibular problems.)

OTHER

- Nausea or vomiting
- Sensation of being “hungover” or “seasick”
- Motion sickness
- Feeling of fullness in the ears
- Sensitivity to pressure or temperature changes and wind currents
- Ear pain
- Headaches
- Slurred speech

An inner ear disorder may be present even when there are no obvious or severe symptoms. It is important to note that most of these individual symptoms can also be caused by other unrelated conditions and should be discussed with a health professional.

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