



How Do I Know if I Have a Balance Disorder?

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

Millions of individuals have disorders of 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.

What can be difficult for both a patient and his or her doctor is that the word “dizziness” is a subjective term. This means that the word can be used by people to describe different sensations they are experiencing, but it is hard for anyone but the person experiencing the symptoms to understand or measure the nature or severity of the sensations. In addition, 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 a

sensation of spatial disorientation or imbalance.

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 perceives an illusion of moving as a train rushes past. However, for some people, symptoms can be intense and last a long time, affecting a person’s independence, ability to work, and quality of life.

Balance disorders can be caused by medications or certain health conditions, including problems with the inner ear (vestibular) organs or the brain. Dizziness, vertigo, and disequilibrium are all symptoms that can result from a peripheral vestibular disorder (a dysfunction of the balance organs of the inner ear) or central vestibular disorder (a dysfunction of one or more parts of the central nervous system that help 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 feel as if the room is spinning around me?
- Do I feel as if I'm moving when I know I'm sitting or standing still?
- Do I lose my balance and fall?
- Do I feel as if I'm falling?
- 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: ...

Take balance disorders seriously.

Balance disorders may lead to other problems including fatigue, difficulty walking, or disinterest in everyday and leisure activities. If you or your child, parent, friend, or co-worker has a balance problem, take it seriously. Talk to the doctor about what happens when the dizziness or imbalance occurs. Be as careful as possible in describing the symptoms.

Definitions:

Dizziness: A sensation of lightheadedness, faintness, or unsteadiness.

Vertigo: The perception of rotational movement or whirling—either of the self or surrounding objects.

Disequilibrium: The loss of equilibrium. It can be experienced as a sensation of spatial disorientation or imbalance.

Spatial disorientation: A sensation of not knowing where one's body is in relation to the vertical and horizontal planes.

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