



BALANCE AWARENESS WEEK to **DEFEAT** *DIZZINESS*

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Yoga for People with Balance Disorders

What is balance?

Our sense of balance is a complex interaction between the inner ear, vision, and somatosensory system (physical cues that tell the brain where the body is in space). Those suffering from vestibular disorders can experience dizziness, vertigo, disorientation, and poor coordination. Fatigue is common, as are postural misalignments due to holding themselves stiffly or over-compensation.

Yoga can help vestibular patients regain balance, focus, movement and coordination.

The magic of yoga

The magic of yoga does not depend on a set of poses. Rather, the healing comes from how the poses are taught and how carefully the teacher watches the response of the student to the poses. Each individual with a vestibular disorder will present different needs, and even the individuals themselves will have different needs on different days.

Different types of yoga

Iyengar yoga is well suited for people with balance disorders. Types to avoid include Bikram, Ashtanga, or vinyasa, as these all depend on a flowing sequence that would be problematic for people with balance issues.

Tips for working with vestibular patients

- ◆ Practice against a wall: Teachers should encourage patients with balance issues to work near a wall to avoid falls, or to have a chair as a balance aid (you can hold the top bar of the chair like you would hold a ballet bar).
- ◆ Focal points: Using physical focal points can help reduce disorientation. For example, if you are experiencing a spinning sensation, mentally focus on those body parts that are in contact with the earth (e.g. if you are standing, that would be your feet).
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- ◆ **Breath:** Focus on breathing slowly. Consciously relax the muscles in your neck, jaw, chest and diaphragm. This will also help reduce anxiety.
- ◆ **Feet:** Balance can be enhanced by working with the feet, e.g. using toe separators, going barefoot as often as possible to keep the muscles of the feet strong and flexible, and getting foot massages to keep the awareness alive in the feet.
- ◆ **Head:** Depending on the level of dizziness one is experiencing, a person with vestibular disorders may not want to move his or her head. Static holds and restorative poses may be best.
- ◆ **Be Gentle:** Encourage the student to have compassion for his or her body. Healing is always slower than desired, and pushing too much goes against the yogic belief that we are already perfect.

Start where you are. Pay attention. Try hard. Accept the limitations of your embodiment. This is the practice of yoga.

Types of Poses

- ◆ Grounding poses:
 - tadasana (mountain pose)
 - savasana (corpse pose)
 - svastikasana (auspicious pose)
- ◆ Chest openers (to help patients lift their spirits and correct their posture):
 - "harness pose" using straps
 - setu bandh sarvangasana (bridge pose) taught with support
- ◆ Balance poses (important, but can be taxing):
 - vrksasana (tree pose) with support
- ◆ Poses to let the eyes and nervous system take a break:
 - supta baddha konasana (the reclined bound angle)
- ◆ Muscle stretching poses:
 - gomukhasana (head of the cow)
 - dandasana (staff pose)
 - upavista konasana (seated angle pose)
 - supta padangusthasana (lying down big toe pose)
 - the "rising sun" pose