
VISION

PHOTOPHOBIA

Sensitivity to light can trigger dizziness, vertigo, lightheadedness and migraine.

ARTICLE

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How Light Sensitivity and Photophobia Affect Vestibular Disorders

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IF LIGHT FEELS OVERWHELMING

If light is making you feel dizzy, nauseated, visually overwhelmed, or just plain miserable, you are not imagining it.

For many people with vestibular disorders, light sensitivity is real, disruptive, and exhausting. Bright stores, screens, glare, and busy environments can make symptoms flare fast.

If symptoms are high right now, start with the basics:

- Reduce the harshest light around you
- Lower screen brightness and take breaks
- Cut glare outdoors with hats, visors, or polarized lenses
- Avoid staying in dark rooms for long periods if you can help it
- Tell your clinician that light is a trigger, not just an annoyance

The goal is not to push through everything or hide from light forever. The goal is to reduce symptom overload while gradually building better day-to-day tolerance.

WHAT IS PHOTOPHOBIA?

Photophobia is the medical word for light sensitivity.

For people with vestibular problems, bright light is more than just annoying. Light can worsen dizziness, vertigo, nausea, headache, eye strain, visual discomfort, and that hard-to-describe feeling of being "off."

Common triggers include:

- Sunlight and reflected glare
- Fluorescent lighting
- Screens and scrolling
- Flicker



LIGHT SENSITIVITY & VESTIBULAR DISORDERS



STATISTICS

More than **90%** of people with **Vestibular Migraine** are sensitive to light during attacks



Exposure to bright light is a known trigger for vestibular symptoms



Light sensitivity affects patients with **Vestibular Migraine, traumatic brain injuries, Meniere's Disease, and other vestibular disorders**



TREAT LIGHT SENSITIVITY

- 01.** Get the right diagnosis
- 02.** Avoid too much dark adaptation
- 03.** Make your environment easier on your system
- 04.** Consider light-filtering lenses
- 05.** Use vestibular rehabilitation
- 06.** Watch emerging approaches

- Busy visual spaces like grocery stores, airports, and large retail stores

In short: If light seems to make your vestibular symptoms worse, that pattern is real.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your vestibular system helps your brain make sense of balance, motion, and your body's position in space. Vision helps with that job, too.

When vestibular processing is stressed, the brain may lean harder on visual input. That can make bright, flickering, or visually complex environments much harder to tolerate.

This is why places like grocery stores can feel so awful. They combine overhead lighting, shiny surfaces, repeating patterns, motion in the side vision, and constant visual decision-making all at once.^[13]

Research also suggests that some people with migraine-related light sensitivity process light differently. Light-sensitive pathways in the eye and brain appear to play a role, and flicker, patterns, and contrast may worsen symptoms.^{[14][15][16]}

To put it simply: For some people, the visual-balance system becomes overloaded more easily than usual.

WHICH VESTIBULAR CONDITIONS ARE MOST COMMONLY LINKED TO LIGHT SENSITIVITY?

Vestibular Migraine

Vestibular migraine has one of the clearest links to light sensitivity. Photophobia is common during attacks, and many people also feel visually sensitive between attacks.^{[1][2]}

Research also shows that people with migraine who have light sensitivity are more likely to report dizziness, vertigo, and higher dizziness-related disability.^[3]

Concussion and Post-Concussion Symptoms

Light sensitivity is also common after a concussion and mild traumatic brain injury.^{[4][5][6]} For some people, it improves fairly quickly. For others, it lasts for months and sometimes longer.^{[6][7]}

Screens, fluorescent lighting, and other visually demanding environments can feel especially hard to tolerate after a concussion. A randomized clinical trial found that avoiding screen time in the first 48 hours after concussion was associated with faster symptom resolution.^[8]

Current guidance emphasizes assessment, pacing, and a graded return to activity.^[9]

Ménière's Disease and Other Vestibular Conditions

Ménière's disease is an inner-ear disorder that causes vertigo, hearing changes, tinnitus, and a sense of fullness in the ear.^[10]



Light sensitivity is not as central here as it is in migraine, but there is meaningful overlap. Ménière's disease and migraine are linked, and some people with Ménière's report migraine symptoms during attacks, including photophobia.^{[11][12]}

More broadly, many vestibular patients also have visually induced dizziness—sometimes called visual vertigo—which means motion, pattern, or visual complexity can trigger symptoms even when brightness is only part of the issue.^[13]

WHAT CAN HELP?

1. Get the right diagnosis

Photophobia is a symptom, not a diagnosis. It can show up with vestibular migraine, concussion, post-traumatic headache, dry eye, and other eye or neurologic problems.

The more clearly you can describe your triggers, the easier it is for a clinician to help. It often helps to say exactly what happens:

- “Fluorescent lights make me dizzy.”
- “Scrolling makes me nauseated.”
- “I feel much worse in grocery stores.”
- “I tolerate sunlight differently from indoor lighting.”

2. Avoid too much dark adaptation

Hiding in the dark can feel good in the moment, but too much light avoidance can make normal lighting harder to tolerate later.^[18]

That is why many clinicians recommend a gradual return to normal light exposure rather than prolonged stays in dark rooms.

3. Make your environment easier on your system

These small changes often help:

- Reduce screen brightness and glare
- Take visual breaks often
- Use warmer, dimmable lighting when possible
- Wear hats or visors outdoors to cut glare
- Limit time in the most visually intense environments when symptoms are high

4. Consider light-filtering lenses

Many people find light-filtering lenses helpful. Selective light-filtering lenses have been studied,



such as Avulux migraine & light-sensitivity lenses. In a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial, follow-up analyses suggested that people with migraine may benefit from wearing Avulux light-filtering lenses to reduce problematic light exposure, headache pain, and light sensitivity.^[19]

A 2025 meeting abstract also reported improved photosensitivity discomfort thresholds with Avulux lenses in healthy volunteers (meaning wearers were able to better tolerate light while wearing Avulux glasses).^[20]

Disclosure: Avulux offers discounts and donates a portion of proceeds to VeDA when you purchase through our website.

5. Use vestibular rehabilitation when it fits

Vestibular rehabilitation therapy (VRT) is designed to improve dizziness, balance, and motion-related symptoms.^{[21][22]}

After a concussion, earlier initiation when clinically indicated may be associated with faster recovery.^[21]

If your symptoms are strongly linked to visual motion, busy environments, or sensory overload, consider discussing vestibular therapy with your healthcare provider. You can find a vestibular-trained physical therapist on VeDA's Vestibular Provider Directory.

6. Watch emerging approaches without expecting miracles

Researchers are exploring exposure-based strategies for vestibular migraine and light-based therapies for traumatic brain injury.^{[23][23]}

That is encouraging—but these are still emerging areas, not instant fixes.



WHEN TO SEEK URGENT CARE

Light sensitivity is often more miserable than dangerous, but it can still be a sign that something else needs attention.

Seek urgent medical care if light sensitivity comes with:

- Sudden hearing loss or rapidly worsening vertigo
- New weakness, numbness, or trouble speaking
- Fainting or severe imbalance with falls
- New double vision
- A sudden severe headache or a major change in headache pattern

BOTTOM LINE

If light makes your dizziness, nausea, or visual overwhelm worse, you are not alone—and you are not overreacting.

Light sensitivity is common in vestibular migraine, concussion-related symptoms, Ménière's disease, and visually induced dizziness. In many cases, the problem is not just brightness. It is the total sensory load placed on a system that is already working harder than usual.

The most useful next steps are usually simple:

- Identify your most consistent triggers
- Reduce avoidable visual overload
- Avoid over-relying on darkness
- Wear light-filtering glasses (avoid dark sunglasses indoors)
- Ask about vestibular rehabilitation if motion and busy spaces are a major problem
- Consider light-filtering lenses realistically, not as a guaranteed fix

Most importantly, remember this: you do not have to solve everything at once. Even a few targeted changes can make daily life feel much more manageable.



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