

# Dizziness

Some people describe a balance problem by saying they feel dizzy, lightheaded, unsteady, or giddy. This feeling of imbalance without a sensation of turning or spinning is *sometimes* due to an inner problem.

## How are vertigo and dizziness related?

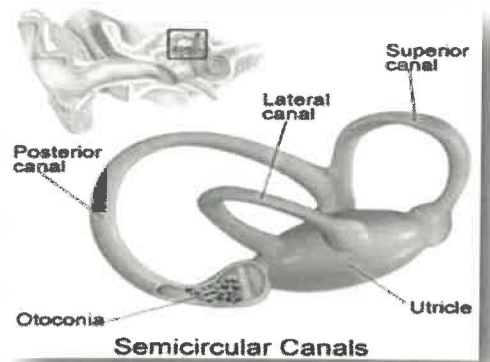
A sensation that you or your surroundings are turning or spinning is called vertigo. Vertigo is **FREQUENTLY** due to an inner ear problem.

Dizziness and vertigo all relate to the sense of balance and equilibrium. Your sense of balance is maintained by a complex interaction of:

- ◆ The inner ear or labyrinth (shown above): monitors the directions of motion, such as turning, forward-backward, side-to-side, and up-and-down
- ◆ The eyes: monitor where the body is in space
- ◆ Sensory receptors in the skin, muscles, and joints: Tells what body parts are touching the ground and what parts of the body are moving
- ◆ Central nervous system: Processes and coordinates all the bits of information from the other systems to maintain our sense of balance

## What medical diseases cause dizziness?

- ◆ Circulation: Disorders of blood circulation are some of the most common causes of dizziness. This will usually give a sensation of lightheadedness, and can be due to narrowing or hardening of the blood vessels to the brain
- ◆ Medications: Certain drugs can decrease blood flow to the brain or can cause dizziness as a side effect (heart/blood pressure medications)
- ◆ Injury: Skull fracture that affects the inner ear. This can last for several weeks but then gradually improves as the inner ear on the opposite side takes over all the inner ear functions
- ◆ Infection: Viruses that cause cold or flu symptoms can attack the inner ear and its nerve connections to the brain. This usually results in severe vertigo that can last several days and gradually improves over a period of



weeks to months. Hearing can sometimes be affected as well

- ◆ Allergy: Certain foods or airborne particles can cause people to feel dizzy
- ◆ Neurological diseases: Certain diseases can affect balance, such as migraine, multiple sclerosis, syphilis, Parkinson's, and certain tumors

## Can my dizziness be cured?

First, your doctor will ask you to describe your dizziness, whether it is a sense of lightheadedness or a sense of motion, how long and how often the dizziness has occurred, how long the dizziness lasts, if you have hearing loss, or nausea/vomiting. You will then usually undergo a comprehensive examination of your ears, nose, and throat. Since the inner ear controls both balance and hearing, disorders of balance

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often affect hearing and a hearing test may be recommended. The physician may also recommend imaging studies of the inner ear and brain (MRI or CT scan) or special balance testing (ENG). A referral to a cardiologist or neurologist may also be recommended if it is not thought that your dizziness is due to an inner ear disorder but rather a disorder of circulation, or to rule out a neurologic disease. Treatment will vary based on the results of your exam and testing.

## Can I do anything to reduce my dizziness?

- ◆ Avoid rapid changes in position (lying down to standing or turning)
- ◆ Avoid extremes head motion (looking up) or rapid head motion (turning/twisting)
- ◆ Decrease use of products that impair circulation (nicotine, caffeine, salt)
- ◆ Reduce stress/anxiety
- ◆ Consider vestibular rehabilitation and exercises such as Tai Chi and Yoga, which have shown to enhance muscle toning and balance.
- ◆ Be aware that medicines such as meclizine and valium are often prescribed, but are better suited to address vertigo (spinning sensation when sitting or standing still), not dizziness, and often make balance issues worse, especially for seniors.