Are Vertigo and Dizziness Symptoms of MS?

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MS and Vertigo: Is Vertigo a Symptom of MS?

Vertigo affects approximately one out of five people who have multiple sclerosis (MS). While vertigo most often comes and goes, some people who have MS experience vertigo or dizziness much of the time.

What Is the Difference Between Dizziness and Vertigo?

Dizziness feels quite different than vertigo. It is a sensation of lightheadedness and faintness, and you may feel weak and nauseous.

Dizziness is a sensation you may feel if you rise out of bed too quickly — a sensation of feeling like you are going to faint. Dizziness is often transient, lasting only for several seconds; however, it may be persistent depending upon the underlying cause. It may be due to low blood pressure, certain illnesses or medication.

Vertigo is a spinning sensation that may make you feel imbalanced, often accompanied by nausea. The floor beneath you may seem like it is moving or rising up.

Vertigo is usually recurrent and can be persistent — it may take months to resolve or become permanent. It often flares up when other MS symptoms are poorly controlled and during times of illness. It is usually due to sensory issues within the inner ear, however, changes in the nerves and brain also create vertigo.

Dizziness and vertigo are managed by a wide array of means. Both are unsettling and may cause you to feel anxious. Staying safe from falls and other accidents is of primary importance whenever vertigo or dizziness are present.

What Causes Vertigo?

Vertigo may be related to MS or may occur due to other causes. The most common cause is benign paroxysmal positioning vertigo, also known as BPPV.

Vertigo is less common due to the development of a new lesion or a flare-up of a current one. Lesions within the middle part of the brain are more likely to cause vertigo than lesions to other areas of the brain.

Sometimes vertigo results from nerve damage to the eighth cranial nerve, which originates in the base of the brain, known as the brainstem. The eighth cranial nerve is the nerve involved with maintaining balance mechanisms within your inner ear.

Medications used to treat MS and other illnesses may also cause vertigo. Drugs used to manage anxiety, depression and spasticity are common offenders. Blood pressure, seizure, heart and diabetes medications may precipitate vertigo too.

Vertigo may be completely unrelated to MS. You may experience vertigo if you are ill with an infection, such as influenza or an ear infection. In rare cases, vertigo is due to a tumor within the inner ear.

MS migraines are sometimes accompanied by vertigo. Meniere's disease is a relatively common condition characterized by vertigo.

Vertigo is sometimes a sign of a stroke or transient ischemic attack, also known as TIA or mini-stroke. If you think you are having a stroke, call 911 immediately.

Diagnosis and Treatment of Vertigo

Diagnosis and treatment of vertigo can be challenging because so many mechanisms are involved with your body's ability to maintain equilibrium. Nerves from your brain, eyes and inner ear and other sensory pathways impact the occurrence, diagnosis and treatment of vertigo.

If you have visual problems or mobility issues, treatment and diagnosis may be more complicated.

Notify your healthcare provider if you experience symptoms of vertigo. It is important to get a complete physical exam so all potential causes of vertigo may be considered.

Review your current medications with your physician or pharmacist so you can make sure they are not contributing to or responsible for your distress.

Next page: possible complications due to vertigo.

Diagnosis and Treatment of Vertigo

Some symptoms may be relieved by the use of over-the-counter anti-nausea and seasickness remedies. Take a stress formula multivitamin, which contains high levels of B complex vitamins. Lying still may be helpful too.

Avoid bright or blinking lights. Some people experience less vertigo when they wear sunglasses. Avoid sudden movements.

If simple home remedies are ineffective, your health care provider may prescribe prescription medications to help relieve symptoms. Medications for MS anxiety, nausea and dizziness are often helpful. Short-term therapy with corticosteroid medications is also sometimes prescribed.

Keep in mind some of the medications need to be taken regularly for an extended period of time in order to reach their maximum levels of effectiveness. Unfortunately some people feel worse when they take medications prescribed to relieve vertigo symptoms.

If you experience severe symptoms, such as nausea and prolonged vomiting, you may need to go to the emergency room so you can be treated with strong medications and intravenous fluids.

In rare cases, surgery is needed to relieve vertigo.

Medical Specialists Help Diagnose and Treat Symptoms

Your health care provider may refer you to a neurologist who specializes in disorders of the inner ear. Advanced testing techniques may be employed to help pinpoint the source of your distress.

You may be referred to a physical therapist who specializes in the treatment of vertigo. You will be instructed how to perform simple movement, known as vestibular rehabilitation exercises.

By consistently doing these exercises at home, relief may be obtained and the need for treatment with medication may be eliminated. These exercises work by restoring proper function of your inner ear.

There are tiny movable crystals within your inner ear that aid balance, and sometimes they don't move around normally. The exercises restore proper movement of the crystals and vertigo symptoms may disappear completely or be significantly reduced.

Complications Due to Vertigo

Vertigo is not just unpleasant, it can have major impacts on the quality of your life.

While many of these impacts are disabling and discouraging, keep in mind you may not experience severe or persistent vertigo. It is usually intermittent and help is available.

- **You may not feel like eating if you are nauseated.** Nutritional issues may arise due to your inability or desire not to eat.
- **You may have to limit your activities due to the sensations which you experience.** Your risk for falling intensifies, which is particularly problematic if you already suffer from weakness, visual disturbances, impaired ability to feel or spasticity.
- **You may become anxious.** This can occur particularly if you are experiencing symptoms for the first time.
- **Visual disturbances may develop or intensify.**
- **You may experience ringing in your ears (tinnitus).** Your ability to hear may also be impacted.
- **Moving may be difficult or impossible if your symptoms are severe.** This includes walking, standing, bending or driving.
- **You may enjoy life less and risk losing your independence.** Some individuals become bedbound due to vertigo.

Be patient — several treatment options are available. Vertigo may even go away on its own.

Everyone responds differently to treatment so it may take some time to find the most effective therapy that will meet your individual needs. Don't give up. An effective treatment is likely to be found that will provide relief of this intensely disturbing sensation.

Resource

WebMD (Vertigo)