



Education

Dizziness

What is dizziness?

Dizziness is a term often used to describe different symptoms. It can mean that you feel unsteady or woozy. It also can be a feeling of spinning. Vertigo is the term health care providers use for when it feels like you are spinning or the room is spinning. It is important for you to explain to your provider what you mean by dizziness.

How does it occur?

Dizziness is not a disease. It is a symptom. Most often it is mild and temporary and a cause cannot be found. Sometimes it is a sign of some other problem.

Feelings of dizziness or vertigo may be caused by an infection or disease in the inner ear. For example, one possible cause is inflammation of the inner ear called labyrinthitis. Other inner ear problems that can trigger dizziness are Meniere's disease and benign positional vertigo.

Dizziness can be caused by tiredness, stress, fever, dehydration, low blood sugar, anemia, head injury, heart or circulation problems, or stroke. It can also be caused by some medicines.

Older people who have either atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) or osteoarthritis of the joints in the neck (which may cause pressure on nerves and blood vessels) may experience vertigo when they suddenly move their heads or bend their head back. Dizziness occurs more often in older adults than at other ages but it is not necessarily caused by disease.

Some psychological problems can cause dizziness. For example, anxiety might cause hyperventilation (rapid, shallow breathing), which may then cause you to feel dizzy.

Less common causes of dizziness include tumors or infections in the brain, or multiple sclerosis (MS).

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask you to describe your dizziness and how it occurs in as much detail as you can. He or she will want to know about any other symptoms or medical problems you are having. Your provider may try to make you feel dizzy by asking you to repeat actions or movements that cause your dizziness.

Your health care provider will examine your ears, eyes, and nervous system. You may have a CT scan (computerized x-rays) of the brain to look for something that may be causing the dizziness, such as a tumor, stroke, or multiple sclerosis.

How is it treated?

The treatment will depend on the cause of your dizziness. Your health care provider will want to treat the underlying cause. For example, if you have Meniere's disease, your provider may recommend a low-salt diet. Your provider may prescribe antibiotics if he or she suspects you have an infection.

If no cause can be found for your dizziness, your health care provider may prescribe medicine for the balance mechanism in your inner ear. These drugs are usually the same drugs you might take for motion sickness, such as meclizine (Antivert).

How long will the dizziness last?

Depending on the cause, mild dizziness usually lasts no longer than 1 to 2 weeks. Sometimes it may last just a few moments. More severe dizziness can last 4 to 6 weeks. With Meniere's disease, the dizziness may come and go or

become an ongoing problem.

How can I take care of myself?

For mild dizziness, the best thing to do is lie down, relax, and wait for the dizziness to go away. Also try to avoid positions or activities that cause the dizziness. Move slowly, especially when standing up.

If you become dizzy while you are driving, pull over to the side of the road until the dizziness goes away. Do not operate machinery when you are dizzy.

Call your health care provider or 911 right away if:

- You suddenly have other symptoms, such as double vision, blindness, or numbness or weakness on one side of your face or body.

Call your provider during office hours if:

- You are following the recommended treatment but are continuing to have severe, prolonged, or repeated attacks of dizziness.
- You have other symptoms along with dizziness, such as a loss of hearing.

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