



Ear Conditions Living with Dizziness

Dizziness can be defined as a disturbed sense of relationship to space, a sense of unsteadiness and a feeling of movement within the head or a sense of light-headedness.

Dizziness can occur when our balance system is not functioning adequately.

Normal Balance

Under normal circumstances, we do not have to consciously maintain our balance. We do this automatically using our motor system, which involves our muscles and joints and information from three sensory systems.

Our motor system is involved in correcting and maintaining our balance and relies on adequate muscle strength, joint mobility and motor skills for this.

For normal balance under most conditions at least two of our sensory systems must be functioning adequately.

Our sensory systems include:

- Our vision
- The vestibular system in the inner ear which gives us information about the movement and position of our head
- Cues from our somatosensory system. These are the messages from the soles of our feet, joints and muscles of our legs and trunk, and give us information about the position and movement of our body. An example of this is when the car next to us takes off but we momentarily feel that it is our car that has moved.

Finally, our brain processes and organises the sensory information it receives, to alter the strength of our muscles and co-ordinate our movements.

It appears that the vestibular system is mainly used to correct any confusion between the other two systems.

Cause of Balance Problems

Causes of balance problems vary. For some people there may be visual problems such as a disorder affecting central vision or vision in one eye only.

People with severe diabetes may not receive all the sensory information we normally get from our lower extremities. When this coincides with visual impairment the balance problems may be exacerbated.

Changes to nerve cells in the inner ear due to ageing or a change involving the fluid in the inner ear as occurs in Meniere's disease, can cause problems in the vestibular system that can lead to dizziness.

The Impact of Dizziness on Daily Life

Poor balance that leads to dizziness may affect day to day life in many ways and can impact on all sorts of activities. It can be brought on by a variety of incidents - flickering lights, the zigzag of an out of tune television, perhaps riding on an escalator or even crossing the street.

Looking both left and right quite quickly when crossing the street or even walking on thick carpet at night, may cause balance problems. People may experience difficulties when walking outside at night, when vision is reduced, especially if they are walking on an uneven surface.

Some people may avoid physical activities, thus affecting their level of fitness, while others may become isolated, as they are unable to continue with leisure activities outside the home.

Many situations can result in anxiety. Shopping at the supermarket may become a difficult task as there is a great deal of conflicting visual information to disorientate balance; for example, many colours, horizontal shelves with containers stacked vertically, trolleys and people moving. An awareness of these problems may impact on choice of activities and independence.

Assessment of Balance Problems

Balance problems can be assessed via a review of medications, technical assessments such as ENG (electronystagmography) or rotational chair assessment and functional assessments such as postural control evaluation.

A physiotherapy assessment will be useful in identifying which adjustment strategies the person is using and their effectiveness. It will help to identify which movements cause dizziness and how the person copes with changes in visual and surface information. An occupational therapy assessment will identify how the person is coping at home, any resulting work issues and any affects on the person's ability to drive.

Management of Balance Problems

Managing dizziness will involve re-training balance and using a range of coping strategies. Movements that bring on dizziness will be identified and exercises will be planned to teach the person to compensate. These “habituation” exercises will be terrible at first, as their purpose is to make the person dizzy!

The aim is for the brain to get used to the feeling of dizziness and therefore feel less dizzy when performing the movement. This is an effective management approach, but will be more difficult for Meniere’s patients as their symptoms can be intermittent.

Relaxation issues and maintaining physical fitness will be an important part of the program.

For more information about exercises please contact your physiotherapist.

A few hints for day to day life:

- Do not move your head quickly.
- When picking up something from the floor, stand slightly to the front and to the side of the object. Keeping the head upright, bend the knees and while still looking forward, pick up the object by feel. Do not look down.
- When sitting down, tense the tummy muscles immediately before rising. Rise, avoiding quick jerky movements and take a deep breath before starting to walk.
- When getting out of bed, swing the legs to one side of the bed and then sit up. Stay sitting on the bed for a few moments before rising.
- When walking, look straight ahead and fix your eyes on a distant spot. Do not watch your feet on the pavement.
- When standing for any length of time, remember that a wide base is more stable than a narrow one. Stand on both feet with the weight evenly distributed.
- Watching rapid movements can aggravate dizziness. When in a fast moving train it is better to look at the horizon than the nearby landscape.

For more information speak to an expert at:



Expression Australia

Email. info@expression.com.au

SMS/FaceTime. 0402 217 586

Skype. [expression.australia](https://www.skype.com/en/contacts/australia/expression-australia)

Phone. (03) 9473 1111

expression.com.au

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