

Physical Therapy for Bilateral Vestibular Hypofunction

What is Bilateral Vestibular Hypofunction (BVH)?

Vestibular hypofunction is a condition in which the balance system in your inner ear, the peripheral vestibular system, is not working properly. There is a vestibular system in both inner ears, and bilateral means that both sides are impaired. The inner ear and eyes work together through the vestibular-ocular reflex (VOR), which is a very fast reflex that keeps vision clear with head movement. This reflex can become less effective when there is a problem with the inner ear.

What are the symptoms of BVH?

Symptoms of BVH can include loss of balance, falls, “jumpy” vision, difficulty walking, unsteadiness (often more in the dark or with head turns), and sometimes a sense of dizziness.

How can physical therapy help me?

A physical therapist (PT) will do an examination, including tests of your vestibular and visual systems, balance, walking, and activities that you are having trouble performing in your daily life. Using this information, the PT will provide an individualized exercise program. The PT may have you perform “gaze stabilization” exercises to try to help the inner ear improve its function. By moving your head quickly while keeping your vision focused on a target, the brain may be able to adapt or reset the way the eyes move with the head. This will help improve your ability to move your head without experiencing blurred vision. The goal is perform 20-40 minutes of gaze stabilization exercises total throughout the day for 5 to 7 weeks.

Your PT will also focus on additional interventions, such as balance training that helps train your brain to use other available information to maintain balance. Other PT treatments may include exercises for improved walking, using assistive devices if needed, and strategies to safely return to activities you enjoy. Exercises for balance and walking should be performed for at least 20 minutes every day for 6 to 9 weeks. Your PT will also provide education about how to manage your symptoms at home and work to improve your ability to perform daily activities.

Adapted from the Academy of Neurologic Physical Therapy Education Handout “What is Bilateral Vestibular Loss (BVL) or Hypofunction (BVH)?”