

Vestibular Neuritis

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Patient Fact Sheet

Vestibular neuritis is a disorder of the inner ear system. It occurs when there is damage to the nerve that connects to the balance part of the inner ear. Its function is to tell our brain how our head is moving. It is usually caused by a virus. It may be due to a recent infection or past disease such as chicken pox. Damage to the nerve may lead to sudden vertigo (a spinning sensation), nausea, vomiting, and imbalance. It will NOT affect hearing. These severe symptoms usually last for one to three days. The symptoms then decrease over time. Head turns and quick movements may continue to trigger symptoms.

What is the treatment?

The initial treatments focus on vertigo, nausea, and inflammation. Your physician may prescribe medications (eg meclizine) to quiet the vestibular system. They should be stopped within the first few days to help the healing process. It is important to start moving your head and walking as soon as possible. Many people hold their head still and avoid any movements that provoke symptoms. These habits can slow recovery and lead to muscle tightness and anxiety.

How can physical therapy help?

Physical therapy can help with your dizziness and imbalance. Your physical therapist will prescribe exercises, called gaze stabilization exercises to improve your ability to see when you are moving your head. You will also work on your balance and walking. The PT will progress your exercises weekly. You will be doing about 12-20 minutes of eye exercises daily. It should only take a few sessions to return to your normal activities. These exercises will help your brain readjust to the wrong messages due to nerve damage.

It is normal for the symptoms to increase when you start PT. It may take up to 6-8 weeks for symptoms to go away. Your PT will let you know what activities or exercises to do after you are discharged. If you remain physically active, you may be able to decrease the time you spend on your home program. Your PT may have you return in six months to one year for a re-evaluation.

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