

Anxiety, Depression and Dizziness

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Provider Fact Sheet

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The Relationship between Anxiety, Depression and Dizziness

Patients who report dizziness (including vertigo) may also exhibit symptoms of psychiatric disorders, most notably anxiety and/or depression. Severity of anxiety and depression are independent of the severity of dizziness. Despite complaints of dizziness or vertigo, these patients may or may not present with an identifiable vestibular pathology.^{1,2} Rather than the symptoms of anxiety, depression and dizziness being attributable to either a psychiatric or a vestibular disorder, it is more likely that each of the disorders are present to some degree and are interrelated.³ For some patients, dizziness resulting from a vestibular disorder can lead to or exacerbate an anxiety or depressive disorder. Furthermore, an existing anxiety or depressive disorder can affect how a patient perceives the sensation of dizziness from a vestibular disorder. Finally, vestibular, anxiety and depressive disorders could stem from a common underlying pathology.

The coexistence of anxiety and/or depression has been identified as a significant risk factor that can worsen vertigo. The combination of dizziness, anxiety and/or depression can lead to maladaptive behaviors in many patients. Patients may begin to avoid symptom-provoking positions, activities, or environments altogether, leading to long-term decreased participation in functional activities, physical deconditioning, and social withdrawal.

Patient Management and the Role of Physical Therapy

Managing a patient with a vestibular disorder, anxiety and/or depression is often complex and frequently requires a team of health care professionals. Vestibular rehabilitation therapy under the guidance of a properly trained physical therapist can help patients adapt to and compensate for altered vestibular function.⁵ However, many of the exercises associated with vestibular rehabilitation cause dizziness initially. While these symptoms are expected to improve over time, reproducing them can be very distressing for patients with underlying anxiety or depression. In many cases, patients also benefit from working with their physician to find an appropriate medication or a cognitive-behavioral therapist to reduce and manage anxiety and/or depression, in conjunction with physical therapy.^{6,7} Using a standardized depression and/or anxiety screen at an early stage can facilitate the identification of patients with concurrent anxiety or depression, ensuring they receive prompt multi-disciplinary treatment.⁴

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