

Vestibulopathy

This leaflet contains information about a condition called Vestibulopathy. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact your GP or health care professional.

What is a Vestibulopathy?

A Vestibulopathy is a condition that affects your inner ear and balance organs. There are different types of vestibulopathy, for example, a **Vestibular Neuritis** or **Labyrinthitis**.

Your inner ear contains the vestibular system, a complex organ that works together with your eyes, muscles and sensation in your lower limbs to keep you balanced and your vision clear when you move. If one of those systems isn't working properly it can cause problems with your balance.

A vestibulopathy can lead to under working of the balance organs on one or both sides. There are 2 balance organs (one in each ear) and they normally work together. When one fails to work properly it can lead to a variety of symptoms such as dizziness, nausea and imbalance.

What are the causes of a Vestibulopathy?

A vestibulopathy can be caused by a number of things:

- A viral infection of the inner ear. This usually comes on very suddenly and the acute symptoms can last for a few days or weeks. As the brain gradually adjusts the symptoms start to get better. However, some people can experience symptoms for a longer period of time and need vestibular physiotherapy to fully recover.
- Occasionally a restriction to the normal flow of blood to the inner ear can cause damage.
- Some drugs can affect the working of the balance system and can cause a weakness on one or both sides.

- Other vestibular or neurological conditions can affect the function of the balance organs e.g. MS or Stroke. A specialist Vestibular Rehabilitation Physiotherapist will be able to refer you back to your GP or a specialist doctor if you have any symptoms that are unusual for a vestibulopathy.

What are the common symptoms?

- **Vertigo.** The main symptom is usually vertigo, dizziness or spinning sensation. At the start it may be severe enough to cause nausea and vomiting and will be constant. As time passes the dizziness will reduce and is likely to be present only with head movements or when moving around.
- **Nausea and vomiting.** This usually happens at the start of your symptoms but the nausea can persist and is usually related to movement of the head.
- **Decreased balance.** Initially balance can be severely affected and you may have problems walking unaided. As the body begins to recover you may notice you feel slightly off balance walking around or when moving your head.
- **Walking and balance:** You may notice some difficulties with walking especially when outside or in busy environments. This may cause you to veer sideways or lose balance with quick head or body movements.
- **Blurry vision:** You may experience blurred vision or 'bobbing' vision when turning your head quickly or moving fast. Others can describe a "catch up feeling" as their vision catches up to their head movement.
- **Hearing loss:** If the hearing organ, the cochlea, is involved hearing may be reduced and you may notice you have trouble hearing conversations in busy places or have to turn up the volume on the television.

What is the treatment for Vestibulopathy?

In the early days when your symptoms are very severe, your GP may prescribe some medication to suppress the vestibular system and reduce nausea. However, beyond this very early stage, medication has limited benefit and may actually prolong the recovery if used for longer. It is beneficial to avoid steroid use in the first 48 hours of your symptoms as this can delay recovery.

The brain will recognise there is an imbalance in the system and will make adjustments for it over time and so the symptoms improve. This is a process called compensation and is most likely to occur if you keep as active as possible despite feeling dizzy.

Unfortunately some people fail to compensate and their symptoms persist. This is when Vestibular Rehabilitation (VR) can have a positive effect on recovery. The aim is to speed up the compensation process by exposing your balance system to many different tasks that bring on your symptoms. This stimulates the brain to recognise the problem and adjust appropriately. This can improve the dizziness.

What should I expect from Physiotherapy and Vestibular Rehabilitation?

Your physiotherapist will take a full history, examine your head and eye movements and assess your balance. Your Physiotherapist will then develop an exercise programme to help improve your symptoms and any balance problems you may have. Occasionally these exercises may initially increase your symptoms but this is needed to help recovery and is entirely normal. It is normal to experience dizziness and imbalance with some exercises, but it should not be severe, prolonged or disabling. If you have an increase in your symptoms with the exercises talk to your Physiotherapist who will be able to reassure you or modify them if needed.

Exercises may include the following;

- **Gaze stability exercises and VOR training:** You will be asked to look at a target ahead of you and move your head side to side or up and down. This helps your eyes and balance system to work better and reduce symptoms triggered by head movements.
- **Balance exercises:** These are designed to increase your confidence moving around and help the different sensors of the balance system integrate for better balance and reduced dizziness.
- **Walking exercises:** These are generally more challenging and may include walking with head turns, throwing a ball or completing a mental task whilst walking and will help you to feel more balanced when out and about.
- **Anxiety management:** Often people with balance problems have anxiety surrounding their symptoms. Usually the exercises boost confidence with balance and walking and anxiety settles, but your therapist may offer advice and guidance to help manage these symptoms if this facilitates recovery.

Your Physiotherapist will progress your exercises, making them more challenging as your symptoms settle and your activity increases. This may happen over a few sessions or if symptoms have been present for a long time it may take longer.

Vestibular Rehabilitation has proved to be very effective in helping patients with a vestibulopathy. Most people will return to a good quality of life and manage any long-term symptoms well.

Useful websites:

vestibular.org

nhs.uk/conditions/labyrinthitis