

Vestibular Migraine

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

What is a Vestibular Migraine?

Vestibular Migraine is one of the most common causes of dizziness seen in a Balance Clinic. Around 30% of people with Migraine experience dizziness at some time, making it one of the most common symptoms. However, many people who are diagnosed with Vestibular Migraine do not have severe headaches.

People with vestibular migraine can experience dizziness, balance problems or other physical symptoms similar to motion sickness. The brain can become very sensitive to movement of the head or of the visual environment. Other symptoms reported include increased sensitivity to light or sound.

Why do I get Vestibular Migraine?

The exact cause of vestibular migraine is still not fully understood. Most people think it is caused by abnormal electrical activity in the brain tissues, which generates changes in blood flow and chemicals in the brain. Some migraines are linked to your genes and might mean someone in your family could also have migraine. The electrical disturbance can be caused by triggers, such as certain foods, stress and sleep disruption etc. The spread of the electrical and chemical 'wave' over different areas of the brain is responsible for different symptoms i.e. the part of the brain that controls vision can produce visual 'auras' under the wave while the part of the brain controlling balance can cause dizziness or balance 'auras'.

What are common triggers?

Triggers can be anything that can start a migraine. Commonly reported migraine triggers include hunger, dehydration, stress,

fatigue, flashing lights and changes in routine etc. However, triggers can be different for everyone and sometimes it can be difficult to identify them which can be frustrating. Keeping a symptom diary is very helpful. Common triggers include:

- Stress – emotional or physical
- Sleep disruption / irregular sleep
- Diet – particularly irregular meals or lack of food; alcohol or caffeine; not drinking enough water
- Hormonal changes e.g. changes in oestrogen or testosterone levels.
- Environmental factors – lights; noise; smell; changes in weather; flickering lights (computer, television, etc.); bright sunshine; smoking. Sometimes it is not always clear whether these are triggers or symptoms of the migraine itself.
- Neck and shoulder tension
- Medication – frequent use of paracetamol / ibuprofen / morphine products

What is the treatment for Vestibular Migraine?

Finding out what triggers an attack may help you. Keeping a diary can help you to identify your own personal triggers. When you look back at your diary you may find a pattern emerges and simple changes to your diet or lifestyle can reduce the frequency and severity of your attacks. Try to follow these general rules:

- **Keep a regular sleep pattern.** Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day, including weekends.
- **Keep regular mealtimes.** Try not to skip meals and eat a healthy balanced diet. Try to eat at the same time every day and there is evidence low carbohydrate and low sugar diets help. Some people find that limiting citrus fruits, chocolate and cheese can help.

- **Limit caffeine.** For people who experience migraine limiting caffeine may help. If you stop caffeine suddenly caffeine withdrawal can cause headaches. Caffeine can sometimes help in the early stages of a headache, which is why it is an ingredient in many over the counter medicines, but this should be limited to not more than 2 days per week.
- **Limit painkillers.** Taking too many painkillers can make headaches worse or cause rebound headaches. Try to limit pain-relief medicine to no more than twice a week or no more than 8 days out of the month.
- **Limit alcohol.** Alcohol can trigger attacks and affect quality and patterns of sleep, so it is best avoided until you find out about your triggers.
- **Moderate Exertion Exercise.** Exercise three to five times a week for at least 20-30 minutes in the daylight. This can include a brisk walk or other activities like cycling, swimming, Tai Chi or Yoga. It is important to move your head when walking around, take notice of the detail around you.
- **Practise relaxation,** mindfulness and stress management. Be kind to yourself.
- **Keep a diary.** Look for triggers and a pattern to the symptoms.

There are a wide range of migraine treatments available, including acute treatments to take when an attack strikes, or preventative treatments which are designed to be taken on a daily basis to relieve the frequency and severity of attacks. Some of these treatments may need to be prescribed by a health professional specialised in vestibular migraine. There are also a range of recommended supplements that you can take that have been proven to be beneficial e.g. Magnesium, Riboflavin, Q10 co-enzyme and Feverfew. In addition, acupuncture has proven to be a successful treatment.

Can Physiotherapy help me manage my Vestibular Migraine?

A physiotherapist who specialises in Vestibular Rehabilitation can provide advice and education about your condition. They will use exercises designed to help you become less sensitive to activities that trigger your symptoms. They may also assess your neck, vision and inner ear function to see if there are any contributing factors to your symptoms.

You may be given a programme of exercises to carry out at home. Usually the exercise prescription is paced and graded to your needs. The wrong type or dose of exercise can make symptoms worse. If your exercise programme is making your Vestibular Migraines worse speak to your Physiotherapist. Physiotherapy may have to be delayed or modified if the headaches are too frequent. It is important to see a physiotherapist with experience in the management this condition.

Useful websites:

migraine.org.uk

migrainetrust.org

vestibular.org