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Patient information: Dizziness and vertigo (Beyond the Basics)

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INTRODUCTION

Dizziness is a feeling that may be hard to describe, but often includes a feeling that you are spinning or tilting, or that you are about to fall or pass out. Dizziness can also cause you to feel lightheaded or giddy, or have difficulty walking straight.

Many people who feel dizzy have vertigo, a specific type of dizziness. Vertigo causes a sense of spinning dizziness, swaying, or tilting. You may feel that you are moving or that the room is moving around you. Vertigo can be caused by a number of different problems involving the inner ear or brain. Some of these problems are not serious while others can be life threatening.

This article will describe the symptoms of vertigo and help you to know when to seek help. More detailed information about vertigo is available by subscription. (See "[Approach to the patient with vertigo](#)" and "[Treatment of vertigo](#)".)

VERTIGO SYMPTOMS

The most common symptoms of vertigo include a feeling of:

- Spinning (you or the room around you)
- Tilting or swaying
- Feeling off balance

These feelings come and go, and may last seconds, hours, or days. You may feel worse when you move your head, change positions (stand up, roll over), cough, or sneeze. Along with vertigo, you may:

- Vomit or feel nauseous
- Have a headache or be sensitive to light and noise
- See double, have trouble speaking or swallowing, or feel weak
- Feel short of breath or sweaty, have a racing heart beat

If you seek treatment for vertigo, you should mention how long these symptoms last, what triggers the symptoms, and any other associated problems. These clues can help point to the cause of vertigo.

COMMON CAUSES OF VERTIGO

The most common causes of vertigo include:

- Inner ear problems — Collections of calcium, inflammation, and certain infections can cause problems in the vestibular system. The vestibular system includes parts of the inner ear and nervous system, which controls balance ([figure 1](#)). Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, Meniere disease, and vestibular neuritis are three of the most common types of vertigo caused by inner ear problems.
 - **Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV)** — BPPV, sometimes called benign positional vertigo, positional vertigo, postural vertigo, or simply vertigo, is a type of vertigo that develops due to collections of calcium in the inner ear. These collections are called canaliths. Moving the canaliths (called canalith repositioning) is a common treatment for BPPV. Vertigo is typically brief in people with BPPV, lasting seconds to minutes. Vertigo can be triggered by moving the head in certain ways. (See "[Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo](#)".)
 - **Meniere disease** — Meniere disease is condition that causes repeated spells of vertigo, hearing loss, and ringing in the ears. Spells can last several minutes or hours. It is probably caused by a buildup of fluid in the inner ear. (See "[Meniere disease](#)".)
 - **Vestibular neuritis** — Vestibular neuritis, also known as labyrinthitis, is probably caused by a virus that causes swelling around the balance nerve. People with vestibular neuritis develop sudden, severe vertigo, nausea, vomiting, and difficulty walking or standing up; these problems can last several days. Some people also develop difficulty hearing in one ear. (See "[Vestibular neuritis](#)".)
- Head injury — Head injuries can affect the vestibular system in a variety of ways, and lead to vertigo. (See "[Concussion and mild traumatic brain injury](#)", section on 'Post-traumatic vertigo'.)
- Medications — Rarely, medications can actually damage the inner ear. Other medications can affect the function of the inner ear or brain and lead to vertigo.
- Migraines — In a condition called vestibular migraine or migrainous vertigo, vertigo can be caused by a migraine. This type of vertigo usually happens along with a headache, although sometimes there is no headache. (See "[Migrainous vertigo](#)".)
- Brain problems, such as a stroke or TIA (transient ischemic attack), bleeding in the brain, or multiple sclerosis can also cause vertigo. There are usually other symptoms, besides vertigo, that happen with these brain problems. (See "[Pathophysiology, etiology, and differential diagnosis of vertigo](#)".)

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

You should seek help immediately if you have dizziness or vertigo along with any of the following:

- New or severe headache
- Temperature greater than 100.4°F (38°C)
- Seeing double or having trouble seeing clearly
- Trouble speaking or hearing
- Weakness in an arm or leg
- An inability to walk without assistance
- Passing out

