

Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV)

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Patient Fact Sheet

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What Is BPPV?

Vertigo is the feeling that you or the room is spinning when nothing is actually moving. It can feel like spinning, swaying, tilting or feeling off-balance. **Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV)** is one of the most common causes of vertigo. It happens in the inner ear. People with BPPV often feel dizzy or like they are spinning when they lie down, sit up, bend over, and roll over in bed. The dizziness usually lasts less than one minute.

What Causes BPPV?

We don't always know what causes BPPV. In some cases, it happens after a head injury or concussion, lying down for a long time, or other inner ear problems. Most of the time, the cause is unknown. The inner ear (vestibular system) helps your brain sense movement and stay balanced. Inside the inner ear are tiny crystals made of calcium carbonate. In BPPV, these crystals come loose and move into the wrong part of the inner ear (into the semicircular canals). When the crystals move into the semicircular canals – a part of the inner ear that senses motion – it confuses the brain. This makes you feel like you are moving when you're not. That is what causes the spinning dizziness (vertigo).

Who Is More Likely To Get BPPV?

Some people have a higher chance of getting BPPV. These include women, people with weak bones (osteoporosis), people with high blood pressure (hypertension), people with sleep problems (not caused by sleep apnea), people with low vitamin D, people who have had a concussion or head injury, and people who are not very active.

How Is BPPV Diagnosed?

BPPV cannot be seen on regular tests like X-rays or MRIs. A trained healthcare provider such as a physical therapist, can diagnose BPPV. They will:

- Ask questions about your dizziness – when it happens, what it feels like, and what makes it worse.
- Do a physical exam using special eye, head and body movements to check if the crystals in your inner ear are out of place.
- Watch your eyes during these tests to look for a type of movement called nystagmus (repeated eye movements). The way your eyes move helps the physical therapist choose the best treatment.

These tests may make you feel dizzy or sick for a short time, but they help find the right diagnosis and treatment to help you feel better.

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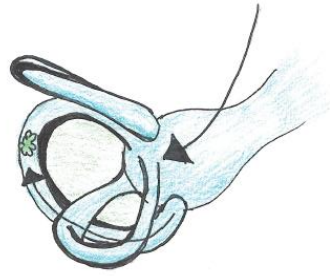


Figure 1: Illustration of the semicircular canals of the inner ear with free-floating crystals in the posterior semicircular canal.

Illustrated by Julie Axelrod, PT, DPT

How Is BPPV Treated?

BPPV is treated with special head and body movements called **repositioning maneuvers**. These movements help guide the loose crystals in your inner ear back to where they belong. The physical therapist will help choose the best movements based on your needs and abilities. Studies show that these treatments can help in 92% of people feel better within three treatments.

What Happens After Treatment for BPPV?

There is no evidence that you need to limit movement after repositioning maneuvers to treat BPPV. Some people may feel dizzy or off balance, so it is a good idea to be careful to avoid falling. In some cases, your physical therapist may ask you to avoid certain movements based on your symptoms. Once your symptoms improve, moving around and staying active can help you recover faster.

Can BPPV Come Back?

BPPV can return in up to 50% of people after treatment. If your symptoms come back, contact your healthcare provider. You may need the same treatment again, or a different one if the crystals have moved to another part of the inner ear. Studies show that some people are more likely to have BPPV come back. These include women, people with high blood pressure or high cholesterol, people with weak bones (osteoporosis), people with low vitamin D, and people with diabetes.

Why Is It Important to Treat BPPV?

If BPPV is not treated, it can lead to: a higher risk of falling, feeling sad or depressed, and trouble doing your everyday activities. It can also make things harder for caregivers. The good news is that BPPV can be diagnosed and treated by a trained healthcare provider, such as physical therapist. Most people feel better quickly with the right treatment.

Why Can't I Just Take Medicine?

Some doctors may give medicine to help with symptoms like nausea or dizziness. However, medicine **does not fix BPPV**, which is a problem with the crystals in the inner ear. Research shows that medicine should not be the main treatment for BPPV. It is best used only to help with nausea and vomiting. Taking these medicines for too long can hide symptoms and make it harder to figure out the real problem.

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