

Labyrinthitis

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Patient Fact Sheet

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What is labyrinthitis?

Labyrinthitis is an infection or inflammation in the part of your inner ear that controls hearing and balance, called the labyrinth. It usually happens after a cold or upper respiratory infection, when a virus or bacteria infects the inner ear or the connected nerve. Labyrinthitis can also be caused by a head or ear injury that leads to bleeding or damage in the inner ear.

Symptoms of labyrinthitis are:

- Sudden hearing loss in one ear
- Feeling like the room is spinning (vertigo)
- Trouble keeping your balance
- Feeling sick to your stomach (nausea) and / or vomiting
- Ringing in your ear (tinnitus)

Symptoms can vary from mild to severe. At first, the feeling of spinning is constant. After a few days, it changes into dizziness and feeling off balance when you move your head or change positions.

How is labyrinthitis treated?

It is important to see a doctor as soon as possible if you have symptoms of labyrinthitis. These symptoms can sometimes be signs of something more serious, like a stroke. If you have hearing loss, your doctor might give you steroids to help. Steroids work best if you start them within the first two weeks. Your doctor may send you to see an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist and/or an audiologist to check your hearing more closely. Physical therapy is also very helpful for improving your dizziness and balance, especially if you start early.

How can physical therapy help?

Your brain needs information from both ears to work well and help you stay balanced. If one side is not working well from an infection or damage, your brain will need to relearn how to understand the information. Moving around helps your brain get used to the changes in the inner ear, so try to keep moving even if you feel dizzy. A physical therapist can give you tips on how to move safely and manage your symptoms of dizziness.

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Labyrinthitis can also affect how your eyes and head work together. There is a reflex called the vestibular ocular reflex (VOR) that uses information from your inner ear to help your eyes stay focused when you turn your head and move.

Your physical therapist can create a special balance and exercise program specifically for you. One exercise is called gaze stabilization. You look at a target while turning your head. These exercises are very effective to help your brain get used to the changes to your inner ear.

It is common to see a physical therapist once a week. They will check which exercises work best for you, how you are doing with the exercises, and how to change them over time. Your physical therapist will also recommend a goal for how many times and how long you should do the exercises at home. Doing the home exercises is very important. They help the brain adjust and help the symptoms improve and eventually go away. It is normal to have an increase in symptoms and feel worse when you first start the exercises. Your brain will learn to handle the movement, and you will start to feel better.

How long will recovery take?

- Recovery takes time and happens slowly over several weeks.
- Research suggests that it can take six to eight weeks for the brain to readjust to changes in the inner ear. Once your body adjusts, many people do not have symptoms anymore and can stop doing the exercises.
- Some people may take longer to feel better, and some may still have mild symptoms. Everyone heals differently. Your recovery depends upon many things including how much damage is in the inner ear, how long you have had symptoms, your age, and how active you are.

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