

Space and Motion Sensitivity

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Patient Fact Sheet

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What is space and motion sensitivity?

People living with dizziness and balance problems (called vestibular disorders) may feel uncomfortable or disoriented in places with lots of movement or busy visual patterns. Doctors may use different names for these symptoms, such as visual vertigo, space and motion discomfort, or motorist disorientation syndrome. Some people with the diagnosis of persistent postural-perceptual dizziness (PPPD) may also have these symptoms.

People with space and motion sensitivity may feel dizzy, sick to their stomach, or confused about where their body is in space when they are in busy places like grocery stores, large crowds, or when things move quickly past them, like fence posts while riding in a car. Children can feel this too. They may avoid playgrounds or busy places, or complain of upset stomachs when riding in a car. Younger children may not 'complain' but rather avoid activities, appear 'cranky' or appear clumsy. Some scientists think these symptoms may happen when a person relies too much on their eyes for balance rather than their other senses (the feeling in your feet or information from your ears).

What can be done about my space and motion symptoms?

Physical therapists often try several different things to help people with space and motion sensitivity. One type of treatment is called habituation therapy. Habituation treatment involves exposing you to more and more difficult sensations that bother you. This kind of therapy helps your brain get used to sights and movements that make you feel dizzy, uncomfortable, or unwell.

In habituation therapy, you start with simple activities and slowly move to harder ones as you improve. If you are exposed to environments and conditions that are too hard for you, symptoms can get worse, so the physical therapist will increase challenges very gradually to keep daily life manageable. Habituation therapy is usually supervised in a physical therapy clinic and is followed up by you in your home. Sometimes physical therapists use videos or screens that show places like grocery stores or shopping malls to help you get used to moving visual scenes.

Some people have very bad symptoms or headaches and cannot tolerate these habituation exercises, especially if they experience migraine headaches. When this happens, the physical therapist may contact your doctor to see if there is a medicine that can "calm down" your symptoms and then will resume your exercise program after you can tolerate the exercises.

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