

Vestibular Dysfunction in Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

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Patient Fact Sheet

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What Is Vestibular Dysfunction?

The **vestibular system** helps you keep your balance, know where your body is, and move your eyes the right way. It includes parts of the **inner ear** and **brain** that work together to keep you steady.

Vestibular dysfunction happens when this system isn't working properly. In people with **Multiple Sclerosis (MS)**, damage to nerves in the brain can affect this system, causing problems with **balance and dizziness**.

Common Symptoms

If you have vestibular problems, you may notice:

- **Dizziness or vertigo** (feeling like things are spinning)
- **Trouble keeping your balance** or feeling unsteady
- Feeling **lightheaded**
- **Feeling sick to your stomach (nauseated) or throwing up**
- **Blurry or jumpy vision**, especially when you move your head
- **Feeling like you might fall**

*These symptoms can come and go and may happen when you move in a certain ways or into certain positions.

How MS Causes Vestibular Problems

MS damages the layer that protects the nerves (myelin) in the **brain and spinal cord (central nervous system)**. This damage can affect areas that control:

- The coordination of your eye movements
- Balance and posture
- Knowing where your body is in space

**This damage can disrupt the signals needed for stable balance and vision.

Diagnosis

To check for vestibular problems, your healthcare team may use:

- A **neurological exam**
- **Balance and coordination tests**
- **Hearing and ear function tests**
- **MRI scans** to look for MS-related problems in specific areas of the brain
- **Special Vestibular function tests** (like VNG or ENG)

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Treatment Options

Vestibular problems in MS can be managed, even if they can't be fully cured.

Treatment may include:

1. **Physical Therapy (PT) specializing in Vestibular Rehabilitation:** A type of PT that helps your brain and body work together to improve your balance and make you feel less dizzy.
2. **Medications**
 - Medicine to help with nausea (e.g., meclizine)
 - Medicine for sudden MS flare-ups (ex. Corticosteroids)
 - Medicine to help prevent future MS related damage (disease-modifying therapies)
3. **Assistive Devices**
 - Canes, walkers, or grab bars to keep you safe and help prevent falls
4. **Lifestyle Tips**
 - Avoid moving your head quickly
 - Keep your home well-lit and clear of clutter
 - Sit or lie down if you feel dizzy
 - Stay hydrated and avoid fatigue

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When to Call Your Doctor

Call your provider if you notice:

- Sudden or severe dizziness
- Difficulty walking or frequent falls
- New or worsening symptoms of MS

Final Thoughts

Vestibular problems can be hard, but **help is available**. With the right therapy and support, many people with MS learn to handle balance problems and stay active.

Work closely with your doctors / **neurologist, physical therapist, or Ear, Nose, Throat (ENT) specialist** to find a plan that works for you.

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